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## **‘Children’s Empowerment in Play’**

Submitted in part requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Faculty of Education and Language Studies  
The Open University

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## **Abstract**

This thesis identifies and explores how child-initiated, social play supports a process of empowerment for young children. It is underpinned by a sociocultural framework and interpretive approach. It argues that opportunities and experiences in early years settings are socially constructed by the ideas and practices which are generated through cultural influences over time. A case study methodology for the research involved a sample of pre-school children, parents and early years practitioners. Observational video data of child-initiated, social play in a range of English early years contexts, including home environments, were gathered. Semi-structured interviews and video stimulated reviews of selected video sequences were also conducted with parents and early years practitioners. Children were explicitly located at the centre of the research and talk with children about their play preferences was a core element in the study. The video data were subjected to systematic content analysis using operational codes developed based on an analysis of the literature surrounding children's play. From the analysis, three super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership, and five sub-themes, Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy, formed the organising structure of a conceptual framework. This was developed for identifying children's empowerment in play along with a supporting definition of empowerment. The conceptual framework represents a novel ethnographic approach to the study of young children's empowerment in play. It offers a new way of thinking about children's play and the way in which it can be observed in early years practice. This thesis argues for a focus on children's empowerment in play as a new way of planning and reflecting upon pedagogic practice. The conceptual framework and definition offer a detailed way in which children's empowerment in play can be understood and analysed so that this can extend and develop early years practitioner's thinking, values and beliefs.



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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis identifies and explores how child-initiated, social play supports a process of empowerment for young children through considering findings and discussions based on an ethnographic study of seven case study children in central England. The research set out to explore children's empowerment in play through different play situations that children experienced in different early years contexts including their home environment. The case study data consisted of video recordings of child-initiated, social play and was supported by parents' and practitioners' views about children's play and empowerment. The thesis engages with contemporary debates about outcome orientated values of play (Lester and Russell, 2008) and the significance of being engaged in a process of empowerment (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 1984). Drawing on current academic debates surrounding children's play and the main body of data collected for this research during 2012, the thesis critically analyses contemporary ideas around how play and early years practice could support children's empowerment in play.

This chapter overviews the context of the study and the themes addressed by the thesis. It introduces and defines the conceptual terminology used throughout and presents the overall rationale for the study and the initial research questions. It introduces the methodology and some of the limitations of the research. Following this, the chapter outlines the thesis' structure, indicating the contribution of the research to evolving knowledge and provides summaries of the following chapters.

### **1.1 Context of the study**

The study of children and what is important for their emotional well-being in early childhood has at its centre an on-going debate about the best ways in which to support children's personal, social and emotional development (Layard et al., 2014). The changing political agendas over the last decade along with shifts in practice fuelled by

different national and regional funding opportunities have resulted in a patchwork of research into diverse and wide ranging areas of childhood (Waller, 2014). This thesis keeps in focus two established perspectives about childhood; firstly that children are socialised according to the expectations and patterns of a particular culture at a particular time (Mayall, 2002) and secondly that children are 'active subjects, not objects' in their worlds (Alldred, 2000, p150). Towards the end of the last decade increasing concern was being expressed that children were experiencing unprecedented levels of intervention into their lives, from academic expectations, surveillance and restrictions on their mobility, suggesting that childhood was becoming an 'era marked by both a sustained assault on children and a concern for children' (James et al., 1998, p3).

Changing social patterns have contributed to the debate surrounding the significance of children's play (Moyle, 2010; Hughes, 2001; Lester and Russell, 2008). That play is a key component in children's cognitive and social development is now recognised by policy advisors and increased investment has been made at local, regional and national level into providing children's play opportunities both in early years settings and in local communities (Wood, 2010). There are now significant data about children's lives, taking into consideration their perspectives and listening to children's views, which reflect some of the developments of wider attitudes towards children as social participants (MacNaughton, 2005). The core of this thesis is the analysis of play experiences of the case study children, how they reacted and interacted with their peers and how their experiences supported processes of empowerment, along with analysis of adult participants' interpretations. These analyses are then used to critically reflect on the broader current issues around the significance of play.

### *1.1.1 My background*

My background is in social work, supporting children who were experiencing challenges in their home and school life. Play was a vehicle to explore personal, social and emotional issues and it was clear that some children had never really had the opportunity to engage in play situations, to be able to express themselves or show enjoyment through interacting with their peers. These experiences ignited my passion for the benefits of play, especially when children could express their ideas and feelings through their engagement with others in a non-threatening, no fear of failure environment. Becoming involved with the playwork community developed my own understanding and I then became involved through local authority initiatives in supporting early years settings in implementing play at the heart of practice. This also involved developing a shared understanding of play and exploring personal play values and beliefs. Alongside this and over the years I have taught play modules in further and higher education and have also worked for a private training organisation delivering play modules as part of a national qualification. I have taught across a variety of early childhood undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and have edited text books aimed at early years practitioners including *Implementing Quality Improvements and Change in the Early Years* (2012), *Play and practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (2011) and *Reflective Practice in the Early Years* (2010) all published by Sage.

### **1.2 Rationale for the study**

The rationale for the study was developed in structured discussions with early years practitioners about their settings and how they implemented a play-based curriculum which was understood as a plan for children's learning through play activities. Many were enthusiastic about supporting children's development through play and considered their setting to be centred on supporting children's play, following children's interests and meeting their individual needs. In order to evaluate practice, settings were visited to observe how practitioners supported and implemented a play-based curriculum. A range

of practices was observed, mainly focused on children achieving outcome based activities, with adult input, structure and guidance. Play was interpreted in different ways, but there was very little child-initiated play where children were able to choose what they wanted to do, have access to the resources they wanted to play with or have the time that would be needed to follow their own interests.

The analysis of observations in settings through the pilot study and adults' interpretations of children's play evidenced not only the diversity of understandings of the term 'play', but also indicated how children can be empowered or dis-empowered by the decisions made by early years practitioners and their actions and reactions in practice. The interviews with practitioners from the pilot study showed that they all considered play to be significant for children's development and genuinely believed they were providing a play-based curriculum. However, they had not considered how their interaction with children impacted on children's play or children's capacity to be empowered by play. The notion of empowerment was something acknowledged by the practitioners as important, but they were unable to articulate what it meant or looked like in practice. The findings from the pilot study helped frame the main research questions and focus of the thesis.

An initial review of previous research into empowerment in the early years, found that there was limited literature on the topic and that most related to the empowerment of early years practitioners rather than children (Howard, 2010; McInnes et al., 2011; Moyles, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Rogers, 2011). In the wealth of literature relating to children's play more generally, terminology such as 'confidence', 'choice', and 'agency' were associated with play, but no links were made with empowerment and this suggested a gap on research specifically about children's empowerment in play. One of the aims of the research reported in this thesis was to develop understandings surrounding early years practice in order to potentially develop a

case for children being given greater opportunities for uninterrupted child-initiated, social play to support empowering experiences. Through considering children's empowerment, the research findings and analyses aim to provide supporting arguments for early years practitioners that will allow them to prioritise particular approaches to supporting play in their practice and thus place greater value on the process of empowerment.

### **1.3 Framing the main research questions**

The research addresses three main research questions:

#### *1. In what ways can child-initiated, social play empower children?*

There are many definitions and positions on play and so, by focusing the research upon child-initiated, social play, a specific perspective on child-child relationships in play is adopted throughout the thesis. This places children at the centre of the play process, considering the choices and decisions they make and the ways in which those choices contribute to their play experiences. The question explores not only a view of play, but also the interactions between children, how they participate and contribute in play situations; how they use the environment and resources around them and how early years practitioners respond and react when children are in charge of their own play. The play environments that children encounter are also to some extent constructed opportunities for children's play, organised by the practitioner. How these spaces mediate opportunities for empowerment are also considered through the research.

#### *2. What is a valid and useful conceptual definition of children's empowerment in play?*

The focus on child-initiated, social play provides a basis from which to critically examine the concept of empowerment and its significance in children's play. Developing an operational definition of empowerment as the basis for observations of children's play is

necessary to support a deeper understanding of the processes involved in children's empowerment in play and how empowerment is made visible in practice.

*3. How can articulating the significance of children's empowerment in play support early years practice?*

The research has generated a novel way of considering what children do when they engage in child-initiated, social play. It has also shown how looking at what happens in children's play from a perspective of a process of empowerment can initiate developments in professional practice. The methodology and findings offer new approaches to observing and recording children's interactions through their participation, ownership of play situations and how they express themselves through play.

#### **1.4 Introduction to the methodology adopted for the research**

Investigations into children's play have spanned diverse theoretical and disciplinary landscapes encompassing qualitative and quantitative studies, from experimental to interpretative paradigms. Research has reflected different schools of thought, focus and agendas within different disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy and anthropology (Silverman, 2001; Mason, 2002). The study of children, James et al., (1998) argue, requires interdisciplinary investigation and this thesis draws on insights from various social science disciplines. At the centre of the research carried out for this thesis are children's experiences of play and the question of how play can support a process of empowerment. These are explored through the collection of video data of case study children in different play contexts. The research is also supported by interviews with parents and early years practitioners to explore their views about children's empowerment and its significance in everyday practice.

The research population was seven case study children located within a 30-mile radius of each other in central England. The research was designed to cover a range of early years contexts, settings and a range of family situations, home environments and socio-economic backgrounds. The research recognised the significance of variation in social and cultural views of children's play, however the sample size and location of the study was necessarily restricted to white British families representative of the communities in which the research took place.

The research adopts the theoretical stance that there is no direct, unmediated knowledge of the world and what children and adults say and do is an interaction with and reflection of meanings generated from particular sociocultural contexts (Foucault, 1980b). Humans are also creative beings and social actors constrained, but not determined, by social structures (Carspecken, 1996) and therefore the social world consists of dynamic interactions, where individuals and groups respond and react to a wide range of influences including culture and environments. Silverman (2001) argues that attaching meaning to actions and reactions should be understood as a fluid process that may be seen as an expression of personal, social, cultural and historical phenomena. The research adopts a reflexive, ethnographic approach to explore the relationship between children's play and empowerment.

### **1.5 Thesis structure**

The structure of the thesis aims to draw together the different facets of the research to address the research questions. Hammersley (1998, p6) argues that 'one of the pitfalls of ethnography is that it can be excessively descriptive'. The thesis was designed to avoid this through systematically coding the ethnographic data, developing operational

definitions to support the analysis of the data and bringing together academic discussion to support the themes emerging from the data.

Following this introduction, on the basis of an extensive review of the existing literature, chapter two explores the significance of play in young children's lives through examining the conceptual definition of empowerment. It explores the multi-faceted views of empowerment from different disciplines and considers empowerment within an early years context. Power relationships between children and adults are examined and in particular the questions of who holds power in play situations. This underpins the discussion about power and truth and how these two concepts impact on children's play experiences. The role of the early years practitioner is analysed in relation to changing attitudes towards pedagogy and working with the curriculum. Alongside this, children's right to play and the complexities of defining play and exploring play discourses are examined. The chapter concludes with a definition of empowerment which supports further discussion and analysis in later chapters.

Chapter three outlines the underpinning theoretical framework for this research, in particular the sociocultural positioning of the study and how children's play and learning are situated within this framework. The chapter considers the interpretive paradigm and the subjective nature of the research alongside the reasoning for the methodological choices that were made, and specifically the rationale for a case study approach. It also examines the positioning of the researcher and the potential impact this had on the validity and reliability of the study.



Chapter four examines the methods used in collecting the research data. It outlines the pilot study which was influential in the design of the final research methods and explores in detail the data generation methods. Emphasis is placed on children at the centre of the research as a significant aspect of the study and the aim to gain children's views about their play. The use of video as a data collection method is explored including how the video observations were organised and how the early years practitioners supported the data collection process. The logistics of the interviews with parents and practitioners are outlined and the use of a reflective diary and accessing setting documentation are considered.

Chapter five provides the context of the research, outlining the sample and the decisions made about the ages of the children in the study. The four different settings are introduced along with the seven case study children and their family situations. Ethics are also explored in this chapter, outlining how consent was obtained for video recordings and how children were selected to take part in the research. Emphasis is placed on children's participation and assent rather than formal informed consent and the complexities of researching children's perspectives and experiences are explored.

Chapter six examines how the research data were analysed by coding the video and interview data, content analysing using the codes and thematic development through interpreting the content analysis. The video and interview data are considered under three main areas; children's choices and their decisions, the context of children's play and the interactions between children. The operational definitions of the codes for the video data and interview data are defined in this chapter alongside how the themes were developed and how computer software was utilised to support the data analysis. The

chapter also examines the reliability of the data through the process of reliability testing and the significance of this for the interpretive elements of the research.

Chapter seven considers the findings from the research presenting a conceptual framework that represents three super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership that emerged from the content analysis of the video data as having significance in contributing to children's empowerment in play. The chapter also identifies five sub-themes, Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy that further differentiate the layered picture of knowledge and understanding about children's empowerment. Examples illustrating each of the super-themes and sub-themes taken from the video and interview data are also given within this chapter. The perspectives of parents and practitioners are also included in this chapter in articulating empowerment and the definition of empowerment is also supported with examples from the data. Finally the findings from talking with the case study children are outlined in this chapter.

Chapter eight discusses and revisits the initial research questions in detail supported by the findings and the broader literature. Key aspects of this chapter include how children's play environments support processes of empowerment and the influence of culture on children's choices and decisions in play. Values and beliefs about play and empowerment are revisited and their impact on practice evaluated. The chapter includes the conceptual definition of empowerment and an assessment of the methodology.

Chapter nine reviews the contribution the thesis has made to developing understandings of the significance of children's empowerment in play. This has traditionally been an under researched area and so the potential impact these may have on early years

practice is significant. It reviews the theoretical, methodological and practical contributions of the research and concludes with potential further directions for the research and recommendations for future early years practice including the use of video review for staff development and the potential for re-thinking the way in which child observations are carried out.

## **1.6 Terminology**

Below are definitions of key terminology used throughout the thesis to support understanding of concepts and practice-based assumptions:

*Playwork* – A theoretically grounded professional framework and qualification structure. 'Playwork is a highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play but is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes' (Skills Active, 2015, online). Playwork aims to provide high quality, accessible play opportunities for children and young people.

*Foundation degree* – A vocational qualification in Higher Education introduced by the UK Government in 2001. It is a level 5 qualification in the UK framework for higher education that runs from level 4 to level 8 and has a value of 240 points in the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) (QAA, 2008). Foundation degrees were conceived to give students with substantial industry experience the opportunity to frame their experience against appropriate academic perspectives. They are accessible to students in paid employment or with substantial and sustained voluntary experience.

*Key worker* – A named member of staff with responsibilities for a small group of children who helps those children to feel safe, secure and cared for. A key worker should respond sensitively to children's feelings and behaviours and support their emotional needs whilst they are attending the early years setting (Elfer et al., 2011). Usually records of development and care are created by the key worker and shared with parents and lead practitioners.

*Forest School* – A woodland or natural environment with trees that gives children opportunities to develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences (Knight, 2013). Forest School aims to promote holistic development fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners. It provides opportunities to take risks appropriate to the environment and create a community for being, development and learning.

*Children's Centre* – Developed throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland they bring together a range of services for families with children under 5 years old and extended services for children up to the age of 11. Services depend on location, but typically include childcare, family support, health services, specialist advisors on employment, and support groups. Children's Centres also work closely with schools and other professionals.

*Early years practitioner* – a person who works with children from birth to 7 years in a variety of settings throughout the private, voluntary and independent sectors. They support children's development and learning through a range of resources and environments and are usually qualified at level 3 or above.

Throughout the thesis the terms 'Early Childhood' and 'Early Years' have been used interchangeably. Both are used within the professional sector and practitioners in this study referred to themselves as 'early years practitioners' working with children aged 0-5 years.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review - The significance of empowerment and play in young children's lives**

In this thesis a position is taken about young children's play where emphasis is given to the significance of recognising children's own agendas and motivations in play and how that can contribute to empowering children. The focus is on child-initiated, social play and observations of play are interpreted from a sociocultural perspective. The data collected and analysed in the course of this research contributes to the debate about the significance of play in young children's lives in supporting their personal, social and emotional development. The concept of play utilised throughout this thesis comes from a particular perspective underpinned by playwork principles which recognise children's 'capacity for positive development, enhanced through access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities' (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005; Brown, 2008). Play is viewed from a child-directed perspective, supporting children in having a degree of freedom in the choices and decisions they make as they play. Enabling children to have a sense of autonomy in their play through controlling what, how, when and who they play with is seen as supporting their participation, ownership and ability to express themselves through a process of empowerment.

This thesis is influenced by the professional field of playwork, the principles and philosophy of which consider play as a process. There are eight playwork principles which are held in trust for the UK playwork profession by a scrutiny group and can be developed or changed through consultation (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005). Reflective practice is a core belief in playwork where shared understanding about play and supporting children through play is continually evaluated. The playwork principles are relevant to my own positionality as a researcher in that I value play as a process which is child-centred and directed, and where children are viewed as experts in their own play. Playwork considers play as inclusive of all children and abilities, providing opportunities for children to experience choice and decision making. It makes provision for risk in play

and relates to formal settings and informal environments. Through my own experiences of working with children, I recognise that play cuts across boundaries and can open avenues for children to engage with others, to become totally absorbed, and that it can be a powerful tool for self-expression. For a researcher, the philosophy of playwork offers a freedom to explore children's play where the child is at the centre of the process.

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to the nature of empowerment, specifically for young children and the power relationships they encounter with other children in their culturally situated lives. The pedagogical approach to play in England is considered alongside children's right to play and how this is interpreted in practice. Three main discourses of play are analysed in relation to the extent to which play is valued. The early years practitioners' role is explored in relation to supporting children's play opportunities and experiences. The chapter concludes with a working definition of empowerment which forms the basis for the analysis and interpretation of the subsequent research.

## **2.1 The nature of empowerment**

Empowerment is a central concept of the thesis yet it can be argued that this is an ambiguous term which is defined in subtly different ways depending on the discipline or profession in which it is used. In this research empowerment is examined in relation to children's social play. It is explored within child-initiated play contexts which give children the opportunity to make choices and decisions with their peers. A key research aim is to develop a valid and useful conceptual definition of children's empowerment in play for developing early years practice. This section considers the literature surrounding empowerment and particularly how the term is used within the professional sector of Early Years.

Defining children's empowerment is challenging because although the term 'empowerment' is shared in many disciplines, how empowerment is understood and what happens in practice can be very different. Being empowered is often assumed, yet difficult to define in action because it can also be expected to manifest itself in different ways, depending on the context of the situation and who is involved. Rappaport (1984) argues that it is problematic as a generic term because it encompasses a range of emotions and behaviours suggesting an intangible and elusive concept. For example, he suggests that empowerment can operate on an individual level or can be experienced by a group. It may be seen in changes in behaviour through actions and interactions in social situations and through the way in which connections are made between people such as finding out they share common interests. Page and Czuba (1999) suggest that being empowered is part of a more complex process involving individual emotions where not everyone may feel empowered at the same time or take the same route to finding a sense of empowerment.

The concept of empowerment is an area of interest in other professions such as community development, economics, youth work and education but is used in different ways to understand behaviour and actions in different contexts. Within these professions there is general caution in pursuing a definition of empowerment in case it becomes prescriptive or formulaic, contradicting the very nature of empowerment as a holistic concept encompassing an experience or way of being (Zimmerman, 1984; Gomm, 1993; Rivera and Tharp, 2006).

Ashcroft (1987) agrees that empowerment should be seen more as a process rather than something that is achieved. He views empowerment as an enabling process where experiences can be made possible for children through the opportunities they have, and by establishing a support network that nurtures children's self-belief, competence and confidence. According to this argument children who regularly encounter empowering



experiences believe in their own capability and will engage with others equipped with a positive attitude resulting in positive outcomes. Ashcroft (1987) argues that the process of empowerment involves a number of components; individual reactions and interactions with others, the environment or context of the experience and others' involvement and responses in supporting an empowering experience.

In this thesis the research focuses on children's reactions and interactions with their peers in social play situations. It also considers the impact of the environment in supporting children's choices and decisions through participation with their peers, the way they express themselves through their verbal and non-verbal communication and through their capacity to have ownership of their play. Making a judgement about children's empowering experiences involves assessing not only the components Ashcroft identifies, but also the characteristics displayed in play, such as imaginative or creative play. This means that accurate observation and interpretation of the apparent nature and purpose of children's play is pivotal in deciding what characteristics or processes of a play situation are empowering or dis-empowering.

Bonel and Lindon (2000, p280) define empowerment as 'conferring power to an individual through an enabling or facilitating process', however understanding who has power in different play situations and considering how they use that power is also central to the concept of an empowering process. This is because children may experience empowerment or dis-empowerment in play as a result of their responses to other children and to their surrounding environment. These experiences may not only support children's exploration of their interests, but also contribute to their experience of empowerment if they are positive or dis-empowerment if they are negative. James and James (2004) suggest that children shape their childhood experiences within the conditions available to them. Therefore, in a social play context with other children, this suggests that empowerment may be explained by focusing on the ways in which children use their

relationships with others through their participation, and expression of voice and their environment and resources to influence the context they are involved in. For example, they may do this by using a resource in a particular way to encourage other children to copy or join in; they may persuade other children to change their play to meet their own agenda; or be creative in their environment so that they have ownership of play through perhaps leading and including other children to share a play experience. Again, close observation is needed in order to establish the parameters of social play that supports empowerment.

The next section introduces three key themes central to the thesis: children's participation, voice and ownership. These themes are discussed in relation to how they contribute to and support opportunities for children's empowering experiences.

### *2.1.1 Participation*

Previous research suggests that children's participation in play is significant to the process of empowerment because the nature of their participation shapes and directs what is happening and can potentially change or develop children's interests or build capacity for on-going play (Hart, 1997). Thomas (2007) argues that participation can mean being listened to or just being present when a major decision making event occurs. However Matthews (2003) considers that active participation is more significant and means being involved, by investing in social interactions with others and risking an emotional investment in caring about what is going on and wanting to be part of that situation. Active participation could also be taken to imply empowerment of those involved in the sense 'that children believe and have reason to believe that their involvement will make a difference' (Sinclair, 2004, p111). Bae (2009) argues that participation is more than expressing individual choice, but is part of a broader experience of belonging and feeling valued. Thus, children in play may become powerful social participants in their own right

as play allows them to express their preferences and interests. Where these are accepted by other children, this signals that their views are important (Matthews, 2003). Participation therefore, has a wider meaning within this thesis as the literature suggests that this is not just about actively participating with peers; it is also about children being able to make choices and decisions about having the opportunity to be curious and explore and to feel that they are included and wanted as part of the play. In its widest sense, therefore, this could be said to involve a process of empowerment because the motivation for play is child-initiated and subsequently sustained for as long as children's interests remain active.

#### *2.1.2 Voice*

Moyles (2005) argues that through play children have opportunities to learn from each other and deal with others' expectations and feelings however these are expressed. For example, they learn to express their views not only through speaking but through their actions, body language, gestures, or where they position themselves within a group of children (Clark and Moss, 2011). In child-initiated, social play children have a choice in what they do as well as what they choose not to do which demonstrates to other children their preferences and how strongly they feel about them (Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer, 2008). As McCarry (2012) argues, children also have to manage other children's responses not only to their verbal communication, but their actions and consequences of their actions. In this research therefore, 'children's voice' is taken as how children choose to express themselves in the widest sense and the impact this has on other children playing the same game or in the same space.

As argued above, children's spoken voice does not always reflect the reality of their experiences; for example what children say is not always the whole story of what they want or need (Percy Smith, 2006). To gain a holistic view of children's views the Mosaic

approach is often used by practitioners as a participatory research method between children and adults (Clark and Moss, 2011) where a number of research tools are used to build a picture of a child's preferences. Often children's voice is examined within the context of adult-child relationships and Shier (2001) argues that their participation can be expressed in terms of the different levels of involvement that can take place between adults and children. But children's voice is also relevant in child-child relationships and particularly in play situations where children may demonstrate different social and emotional skills in using their voice effectively. It could be argued, therefore that Shier's levels of participation between adults and children may also be applied to child-child relationships in that children in play often:

- listen to the ideas of other children;
- support other children around them in expressing their views through words or actions;
- have their views taken into account by the children around them resulting in action or rejection;
- are actively involved in decision making;
- take responsibility or the lead in a play situation.

This thesis considers that there is interconnectedness between children's voice and participation in child-child relationships in play, as the more children want to be involved, the more opinions they have about the direction of their play. Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) argue that in order to be creative in play situations, children have to communicate effectively so that their play is able to evolve, be negotiated and contain a certain amount of compromise so that everyone involved in the play achieves a sense of satisfaction. Children quickly learn through play that if their participation is too dominant or if they attempt to force their views on others, they are often left playing alone; the other

children vote with their feet (Hughes, 2001). Therefore children's participation and voice may be closely associated with the process of empowerment as part of experiencing and building social relationships, being involved in play, having ideas affirmed or ignored, and building capacity to be adaptable and flexible in the play situation (Guilbaud, 2003).

### *2.1.3 Ownership*

Robson (2010) argues that when children feel they have control or ownership of something, it helps them feel secure and confident in what they are doing. Christensen (2004) goes on to suggest that having a sense of ownership is powerful because children feel comfortable and secure in the situation, have knowledge about what might happen and are familiar with the other children around them. Ownership supports active interest and engagement in contributing and influencing what is happening and taking a leading role in the development of play. Therefore, Sinclair (2004) contends that recognising children have a vested interest in their play environment also supports the validity of their play agenda, allowing children to follow their own interests and come to their own conclusions.

As these two authors suggest, through the ownership of play, common interests emerge in the interactions between children; they begin to seek out each other to play with and often the same themes appear in the play. When children cooperate, working towards the same goal or purpose, their play supports the sense that they are in control of the immediacy of their play environment. Ownership also reaffirms familiarity in the processes of common practices which often reflect children's particular community and culture (Christensen, 2004). When there is a sense of ownership in children's play Treseder (1997) argues there may also be characteristics of group cohesiveness in working together, coming up with creative solutions to problems and children feeling able to express their personality and emotions. According to Whalen (1995), ownership in play

relates closely to children's knowledge and how they use that knowledge to support the development of their play and involve others. This thesis hopes to demonstrate that ownership in play does not have to be the physical ownership of an object, but can also be ownership of an emotion or memory. Children might share a smile between them, remembering when they last played the same game, or express themselves through their movement; jumping up and down on the spot together in the knowledge that the other child is sharing the same feeling.

So far empowerment has been considered on an individual basis in terms of participation, voice and ownership. In this next section, power relationships are explored between adults and children and between children as these can influence the process of empowerment in a variety of ways.

## **2.2 Power relationships**

Early years practitioners consciously and unconsciously hold power over children's play, making decisions which impact on children's choices. The physical environment provides boundaries for children as does how practitioners and other children behave within that space. Most situations that children encounter have a set of rules which help to organise and guide behaviour (Foucault, 1984) and children learn that stepping outside of the rules means there will be consequences. Ailwood (2010) argues that from a very young age children understand how social rules work based on their own experiences and by observing other children and adults in a range of situations. Children can recognise when they are able to push the boundaries and Loizou (2005) suggests that there are times when children are empowered by the idea of 'seeing what might happen if...' causing a reaction from a practitioner or parent/carer. Foucault (1980a) suggests that within any given situation, anyone can have the opportunity to be powerful through their actions and reactions and their understanding that power operates on a fluid basis, so that one person

is not powerful all of the time. In this way power can be productive, influencing different relationships between adults and children and between children at different times and in different situations (Foucault, 1980b).

As Loizou (2005) has established, children sometimes test out the boundaries of power relationships in their interactions with early years practitioners and parents or other adults. Children making decisions about what they are going to do or how they are going to behave, act consciously through what Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power where children are able to self-regulate their own behaviour or make a decision not to follow instruction. It is clear that the everyday rules that children encounter and learn through their interactions with others may generate a sense of normality through regulating expectations and accepting hierarchical structures (Alverson, 2002). Similarly, children learn that different structures and procedures exist in different situations; as Loizou (2005) observes, children often direct each other or may even reverse conventional power relationships. For example, they may remind the practitioner or parent/carer about what they should be doing next or about rules associated with certain play such as wearing an apron when painting. Knowing the rules can offer children a sense of power and familiarity, supporting a confidence in their actions and interactions with other children and practitioners.

### *2.2.1 Power in social play*

Bauman and May (2001) suggest children gain a sense of power by being given the opportunity to make choices in play and to act on their decisions. The process of supporting children to feel in control of their play requires a gradual development of trust on the part of practitioners in what children will choose to do, and an understanding of how play can be facilitated to ensure an environment that is safe but stimulating. Bandura (1962) stresses the importance of supporting children in building a sense of self-efficacy

where through different experiences they develop self-belief about their effectiveness and competence. Developing these attitudes enable children to cope with particular situations. According to Bandura, the play interactions that children encounter in social group play help them to practice and develop their understanding of the patterns and processes that underpin social relationships and friendship. In the same way Ashcroft (1987) views power as a potential capability, that is exercised through action and thus as a process rather than as an end product. Similarly Hoyle (1999) argues that power is subsequently sustained through relationships, dialogue and negotiation. For children, therefore it is reasonable to suppose that as these processes feature strongly in social play, this kind of play allows children to experience empowerment.

In social group play where children have choice it may be particularly revealing to observe the decisions they make in terms of their engagement depending on how self-assured they feel to actively participate (Canning, 2011). This is because as Smith (2010) suggests, when children make play choices they can use the opportunity to make decisions about their engagement and behaviour. They can then be innovative in their thinking and apply this to their play situation to develop strategies to be accepted into social group play (Smith, 2010). Children involved, for example, in risky play have to find the courage within themselves to take risks such as climbing a tree or acting independently of their peers, but in demonstrating their confidence to other children they often become leaders of the play, being able to influence other children into copying their actions and behaviour (Sandseter, 2009). This corresponds with Foucault's positioning of power as an action rather than a possession which can be supported through different relationships at different times (Foucault, 1980b).

### *2.2.2 The power of the practitioner*

Brunson and Vogt (1996) suggest it is a skill to judge the flexibility needed in practice to meet the curiosity of children and give them opportunities to experience different



resources, make choices and express preference over what they are doing. Practitioners have greater knowledge of social and cultural traditions and therefore are not only able to impose these on children through behavioural expectations but are also able to occupy a disproportionate aspect of power over children because they can control the environment and what happens in it (Burke, 2008). When practitioners work in well-established routines they may become complacent and lose sight of providing different opportunities for children to express their individuality. Consequently Howard (2010) warns that practitioners should be mindful of the power that 'top down' external influences may have over them through policy and curriculum guidance in directing practice. Foucault (cited in Rabinow, 1984) refers to this as 'governmentality' where groups of people are managed through being told what to do and how to do it. But power may also exist in knowledge, and understanding the power that individuals hold through their experience and knowledge base of early years cannot be underestimated as MacNaughton states:

'Once we understand how power operates through ideologies to oppress and constrain in our particular social and political contexts, we can begin to understand what needs to change and why' (MacNaughton, 2005, p11).

### *2.2.3 Power and truth*

Having power over others can produce a set of 'truths' which groups of individuals start to believe in (Gore, 1993). But Albon (2010) warns that power can never be value free or objective and as such the motivation for power should always be questioned. A set of truths believed and practised by individuals within a given profession creates a 'regime of truth' which in time becomes an authoritative consensus about how things should be done. Gore (1993) believes that developing a regime of truth helps establish power relations. But Foucault viewed truth as an 'art of government' where government referred to 'techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour' (Rabinow, 1984, p81).

Consequently Foucault identified that truths become woven together to govern what is accepted as a way of doing something or a goal to strive for or a way to act, think or feel. Within Early Childhood there are many perspectives of what children's play should look like, its content and purpose which are held as 'truths'. If a particular truth of children's play is part of an early years practitioner's daily practice, it becomes part of what that individual does, thinks or feels and is embedded in actions and reactions to children's needs. Practice then disseminates through the setting and influences others which results in a particular 'truth' being accepted and results in the governability of groups of people where they are compliant in being told what to do and how to do it. In this way power can operate without people realising it, resulting in an undercurrent of practices and relationships which may influence children's experiences within a setting.

### **2.3 Early years curriculum and pedagogy**

The positioning of play in the early years curriculum and how play informs pedagogical practices is a central theme in this thesis. Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008, p623) argue that 'play and learning are natural components of children's everyday lives' and should be a seamless way of nurturing children's development. However, ambiguous terms are used to describe play, and the challenge for early years practitioners is to be able to clearly articulate what happens in practice and defend their decisions in relation to curriculum demands (Stephen, 2010). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states that 'children learn by leading their own play and by taking part in play which is guided by adults' (Department for Education (DfE), 2014, p9). However, it does not provide any guidance on desirable pedagogic practice to support play other than 'it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for year 1' (DfE, 2014, p9). Play does not fit easily within curricula which expect outcomes and the ability to measure children's progress because, as Wood (2010) argues, play is linked to wider benefits and determining factors

such as physical and mental health, creativity and emotional well-being. Play is promoted within curriculum guidance as having a purpose, having a structure and reaching a satisfactory conclusion (DfE, 2014). The nature of the current early years curriculum is compartmentalised into areas of learning, rather than adopting a holistic approach to children's experiences and learning.

This thesis argues that a motivation for play is universal and intrinsic in children and is not bound by curricula, socio-economic status or class. This research focuses on children's play experiences and how they are empowered by that experience. Play in this thesis is not about meeting political agendas or ticking the boxes for policy compliance. However, the research does recognise that all early years practitioners work within a social and political context and often find themselves constrained by directives, reports, recommendations, guidance and requirements. Government policies also have a strategic impact not only in shaping early years provision but also in influencing what children should learn and the type of care and education that they should receive. This may have an impact on children's play within an early years setting if play is sidelined for other activities perceived as more important because they are highlighted by a curriculum. Yet all early years settings make some provision for play and children find opportunities for play, even if it is perhaps not the focus of the activity. Hughes (2001) maintains that all children find ways to play because it is something that they have to do as well as wanting to play and engage with others in play. He also argues that it is not just in organized settings where children play and these spaces such as home environments, community play parks and street corners also provide rich and diverse play experiences. Practitioners may feel overwhelmed by policy directives and curriculum demands and Howard and McInnes (2010) contest that this may have a detrimental effect on children's overall experience. They argue that maintaining a high level of reflective and knowledgeable practice is an adult and professional concern linked to professional identity

and self-confidence. Professional identity and confidence, however, may be compromised where policy demands may run counter to practitioners' knowledge and experience.

Stephen (2010) considers that there are two 'big ideas' that underpin early years practice in the UK at present. One is that early years provision should be child-centred and follow the child's interests in relation to the choices they make, who they choose to engage with and how they participate in activities. Allowing children to 'wallow' in their play provides an insight into children's interests and preferences (Bruce, 1991). The other idea is that play can be formalised into a series of engaging activities which forefront learning opportunities and achievable outcomes. Wood (2010, p16) believes that this approach means that play is 'intrinsically bound with contemporary policies of education, because it is subject to regulation and management' based on the ideology of education at the time. Consequently play becomes tied to educational versions of learning ideas rather than an independent process that is personally directed and intrinsically motivated (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005).

The pedagogic strategy then, which is adopted by the early years practitioner, is central to the play opportunities children experience. Pedagogy has been described as the application of professional judgements enhancing the learning of another (Alexander, 2004) and the act of teaching (Watkins and Mortimer, 1999). In applying professional judgement, the practitioner makes decisions on the day to day routine of the early years setting, but as Moyles, et al., (2002) warns from their *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* (SPEEL) many practitioners are unaware that the decisions they make have a pedagogical impact. Consequently there is a gap between 'acknowledging that play forms the bedrock of early learning' and 'an agreed pedagogy of play' (BERA, 2003, p14). Therefore, the pedagogical practice that exists in most early years practice is a historical mix of acknowledgement of the benefits of a play-based curriculum (from the

2008 version of the *Early Years Foundation Stage: Development Matters*) with the present emphasis on outcome based learning strategies.

A pedagogical approach to play is based on how the practitioner frames pedagogy so that an ideology of 'playful approaches for successful outcomes' (DCSF, 2009, p4) can result in a balance between play which is child-centred and more formal practitioner led activities which can extend children's learning. However Stephen (2010) argues that the challenge is that practitioners find it difficult to articulate how they support play-based learning and what pedagogy means on a personal and practice based level. Consequently the pedagogy of play is reduced to an instrument for learning rather than an activity that provides a transformative experience (Rogers, 2011).

In other cultures early years pedagogy is seen in a very different way. Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy is concerned with social construction of learning and meaning making involving the whole community and placing importance on hearing children's voices and acting on their opinions (Malaguzzi, 1998). The pedagogy adopted is a philosophy of practice where significance is placed on time for dialogue between children and space for social interaction. Children are co-constructors of knowledge and the adult role is to support the process. In Reggio the curriculum arises from children's interests and the pedagogic practice involves negotiating with children to understand what can be learnt from children's involvement with their peers and with the resources. The philosophy of practice is adopted by the whole community who it is hoped support every aspect of the process and act as a micro unit around the education of their children.

Across the other side of the world, the New Zealand curriculum, 'Te Whariki' also adopts a specific sociocultural perspective. Rather than content the curriculum is based on nurturing learning dispositions through concentrating on developing children's well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration (New Zealand Ministry of

Education, 1996). Practitioners promote the different cultural heritage of Te Whariki (Maori and Western European) through activities, which encourage and support reciprocal and responsive relationships between children and between children and adults.

The role of the practitioner in both the examples of Reggio Emilia and New Zealand enables pedagogy where reflection on both engagement between children and adults' engagement with children can be analysed as part of the play process. Taguchi (2010, p116) suggests that 'we must often stand back and wait to see what might happen next' and this approach supports a child-directed perspective with the role of the practitioner as having a 'hands off' approach.

Child-directed play supported by practitioners working within the Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki traditions highlights the importance of adopting a cultural historical perspective to the study of play and empowerment. This perspective recognises that views about the significance of play in children's everyday lives are dependent on the cultural context, historical traditions and cultural constructions of childhood prevalent in a particular society at any period in time. Waller (2005), for example, argues that play experiences offered to children often reflect a socially constructed view of childhood of what is considered appropriate at the time. Mayall (2002), however, takes a longer view and argues that childhood including play is informed by the culture of a surrounding community and therefore traditions, beliefs and values about childhood are shared and kept alive through generations of families and community connections. This is very much apparent in the Reggio Emilia example given above. Van Oers (2010, p196) recognises other influences in that 'the conception of play changes across history and cultures in compliance with specific historical, ideological and economic conditions', and this is reflected in the New Zealand example, where concerns about integration and Maori cultural heritage have had a significant influence on the early years curriculum.

It is apparent therefore, that the term 'play' is used and interpreted in many ways in the early years and that this depends very much on local, historical and sociocultural contexts and traditions. As Sutton Smith (1997) points out, play is also interpreted according to research interests, as well as cultural influences or personal emphasis. Even the pioneers of play, such as Froebel (1782-1852), McMillan (1860-1931), Isaacs (1885-1948), Steiner (1861-1925) and Piaget (1896-1980), placed an emphasis on different elements of play depending on their research interests and experiences. The subjective nature of interpreting play adds to the complexity of attempting to work towards a definition of play. Consequently this thesis argues that the unique characteristics and qualities that children express during play through what they choose to do, who they play with and how their play evolves in the moment and over time means that close observation of play, as the dominant way in which children express their preferences will be necessary to reach an understanding of play in relation to children's empowerment.

#### **2.4 Recognition of the right to play**

Children's play has become recognised as a right in itself and is formally set out in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states:

'Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (UNCRC, 1989, article 31, part 1).

'Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity' (UNCRC, 1989, article 31, part 2).

Davey and Lundy (2011) argue that a rights based approach to children's play emphasises issues such as freedom, choice and inclusion and that these issues are an important and necessary part of children's play. The intrinsic value of play for children and the significance of adult free play spaces advocated by Hughes (2001) emphasises that play is important in its own right. Davey and Lundy (2011) go as far to say that play is an entitlement, not an optional luxury to be fitted in around planned activities.

Considering children's play from a rights based approach means that what children do within their play is also significant. Participation in play is a way of developing interaction and communication between children which in turn supports the construction and creation of social relationships (Prout and James, 1997). Children's voice within play enables them to have their ideas listened to by other children, to make decisions about their involvement in social group play and show their choices through their physical contribution or emotional investment. Having ownership of their own play is also significant for children; it supports their active engagement in contributing and influencing what is happening and potentially taking a lead in the development of play.

The importance of children's participation, voice and ownership in play situations is supported by article 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 declares that 'children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters that affect them' (UNCRC, 1989, article 12, part 1). A play situation is where potentially children have the most influence over other children in what they are doing and whom they are playing with. Article 13 presents the right to freedom of expression and specifically details the range of media that should be open to children to receive information and to express their ideas either, 'orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of the child's choice' (UNCRC, 1989, article 13, part 1). As Powell (2009) points out, in early years settings play is usually the medium of choice for children to express their ideas.



Mason and Bolzan (2010) consider that empowerment should also be a right for children, and this will be encouraged in situations where they have choices and are able to explore environments, materials, emotions and social relationships. Being able to participate, to express views and to be in a position of control or ownership of play enhances skills such as negotiation, communication and decision making which Sinclair and Franklin (2000) consider as part of the process of empowering children so that they have a sense of self-efficacy and the experience of positive self-esteem. The process of empowerment goes beyond just recognising children's rights (Kellett, 2004); the right to play has value in supporting children with opportunities to express themselves on their own terms, to explore their own interests and to recognise their limits and boundaries.

## **2.5 Defining play and social play discourse**

Although the right to play is recognised in UNCRC (1989) article 31, the value placed on children's social play, and how this is supported in different contexts by professionals and parents, is open to debate. It is dependent upon how play is viewed, the level of importance placed on thinking and talking about play and recognising the benefits and significance of play in young children's lives. This is because, as Moyles (2005) points out, play is multi-faceted, and can mean different things to different people, at different times. Furthermore, children's social play constantly evolves as they explore their interests and share their ideas through actions and communication. Fromberg and Bergen (2015) maintain that play is a relative activity with different functions and different meanings for children dependent on the situation, environment and influences from other children. Play is not static, it involves a fluid interplay between experiences, imagination, and curiosity, which support children's development and understanding of the world. Consequently Ailwood (2003, p288) describes play as 'an elusive concept that refuses to be pinned down'. The subjective nature of play ensures that it can be observed and

interpreted in many different ways. The 'play' discourse that most closely aligns with individual values and beliefs is likely to determine the professional practice in decisions made in early years settings and the subsequent play opportunities children engage with.

The subject of children's play has been extensively explored, from studies of the function of play amongst animals (Huizinga, 1955) to developmental and therapeutic functions of play. It has been characterised as an exertion of excess energy (Spencer, 1820-1903); a cathartic process (Hall, 1846-1924); a key part of cognitive development (Piaget, 1951); a potentially self-healing process (Axline, 1964) and a reflection of culture and evolutionary drive (Hughes, 2001). Yet play is a complex construction that cannot be encapsulated simply in a single overarching definition; its very nature includes some or all of the characteristics outlined above, depending on the way in which it is interpreted within the context of a situation. Conceptually, definitions of play must necessarily concern children's 'own activity: a voluntary, intrinsically motivated experience where the activity itself is more important than the outcome' (Bateson, 2005, p14).

Moyles (2010) aligns defining play with seizing bubbles and argues that play can be recognised without the need for a precise definition. However contemporary understandings of play in the early years are wide ranging from play as child-led, open ended without following an adult agenda to structured adult-directed activity. As use of the term 'play' encompasses such a broad ideological spectrum and multiple perspectives, this inevitably translates into a patchwork of professional practice in supporting children's opportunities to play. Furthermore, in any one setting, even though the opportunities offered are ostensibly the same for all children, play is such a personal experience that while one child may appear to be having fun, another may not have the same experience when playing in a similar situation. Howard and McInnes (2010) argue that when considering what play means to an individual child, it is important to make distinctions based on the emotional cues being given by that child, such as levels of fun

and amount of choice, as well as considering the environmental cues such as the context and location of play. Again, this means considering play from a child's perspective may provide indicators to recognising what is and what is not play, although this is not necessarily given weight in the various discourses of play described in the next section.

### *2.5.1 Discourses of social play*

Discourse relates to a body of thinking where groups of individuals share the same language when talking about a topic and develop shared understanding around different perspectives. Foucault (1972) believed discourse is also connected to emotional responses and therefore can develop and change depending on feelings and experiences at different points in life. Discourse also relates to professional practice informing daily activities, the way in which working with children is approached and how thinking and reflecting on practice becomes part of an individual's value and belief system (Albon, 2010). In a perhaps unconscious way, a dominant discourse can influence thinking, behaviour and practice towards certain topics such as children's play. Some groups have power to enforce their discourse more than others, for example Government views of the purpose of education may hold more influence than a community action group promoting the need for children's play spaces. However, although Government views may be more widely disseminated, they may not necessarily carry more weight at a local level. Consequently the power of dominant discourses can shape wider understanding through 'regimes of truth' (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 1984) whereby a particular discourse shapes thinking and debate. Therefore different practice, values and beliefs are developed depending on the discourse adopted, but this usually happens on an unconscious level rather than being a deliberate decision. Equally, discourses can overlap where there are some shared commonalities of practice based on different understanding or slightly different perspectives. Van Oers (2010) argues that historically play has been based on two assumptions; that play originates from natural behaviour, grounded in naturalistic

interpretation of human development, which has been romanticised by the writings of pioneers such as Rousseau. He argues that the other assumption is that play is seen as separate to learning or work, where children practice or simulate skills in preparation for adulthood. Ailwood (2003) agrees, but takes this further by outlining three dominant discourses of play; the romantic or nostalgic discourse, the play characteristic discourse and the developmental discourse. Each discourse considers the value and understanding of play from different perspectives, which results in different approaches to play in contemporary early years practice.

### *2.5.2 Romantic or nostalgic discourse*

The nostalgic discourse of play views childhood as a state of innocence and play as 'natural'. This discourse has its roots in the Romantic era and the writing of people such as Rousseau (1712-1778), Pestalozzi (1747-1827) and Froebel (1782-1852). A nostalgic discourse can idealise childhood play experiences, and adults who uphold this view reflect on their own play as a child and remember its positive aspects of play such as excitement and freedom. The nostalgic discourse attracts an emotive response such that adults reflecting on their own play experiences want to provide similar positive experiences for their own children or children in their care to those that they encountered as a child. Consequently when discussing play, adherents of the nostalgic discourse often use an anecdote or story where what is being remembered is analysed in a positive way to reflect the romantic notion of the benefits of play.

The nostalgic discourse of play has been the dominant discourse until fairly recently (Ailwood, 2003). This has meant that play has not always been recognised as a rich environment for learning or having the potential for holistic development. The nostalgic discourse has allowed play to be compartmentalised as something that happens after a

more formal, adult-directed activity. The latter is usually prioritised because the learning potential of this type of activity can be analysed in a more systematic way. The term 'just playing' sums up the notion of play as a by-product of children, something that happens after completing formal activities (Moyles, 1989). Thus, a nostalgic view does not always recognise the inherent value of the processes of play, as it focuses on the emotional significance of play as described in individual recollections of positive past experiences.

### *2.5.3 Play characteristic discourse*

In contrast, researchers who uphold the play characteristic discourse (Ailwood, 2003; Bruce, 2011) attempt to identify different behaviours evident in children's play and group them together into categories that can be used to support further analysis and discussion. Underlying the play characteristic discourse is the assumption that the various categories of play can be described as a set of processes rather than outcomes or as an end in itself (for example, Bekoff and Byers, 1981; Martin and Caro, 1985; Pellegrini and Smith, 2005; Hughes, 2001). The categories can be conceptualised as making up the different 'ingredients' of play and offer an explanatory framework that can be used to understand the behaviours that contribute to play in different situations. In providing an operational definition of each category of play they identify, researchers attempt to differentiate between categories in terms of what children are doing and what this means for their development.

This research enterprise has resulted in extensive categorisations with long lists of play types. For instance, Blatchford et al., (1990) name 24 different play types based on Opie and Opie (1969) definitions of children's games played on streets and playgrounds, and Hughes (2006) identifies 16 types of play among children in his playwork research. Ailwood (2003, p289) however, critiques this approach and argues that lists of play characteristics are a 'conglomerate of various constructions and discourses of childhood'

and that play characteristics should not be seen in isolation but within the context of social and cultural influences. In practice, the play characteristic discourse is used to label and describe what happens in children's play as a way of supporting early years practitioners in recognising characteristics of play. For example, Garvey (1991) identifies 5 commonly accepted characteristics of play: positive affect, intrinsic motivation, free choice, active engagement and as the made up world or fantasy of children. Labelling play characteristics in this way means that their definitions are open to subjective interpretation which supports debate amongst the early years community to continually evolve and develop shared understanding.

Howard (2002) considers play in terms of sets of criteria or continuum definitions, which focus on behaviours and dispositions of play. She argues that the different sets of criteria for defining play all have the same thing in common, that they are based on adults looking at, and making subjective judgements based on the observable act of play. In the same way as Garvey (1991), Howard points out that what is observed is open to interpretation and the same sequence of play may be viewed or characterised in different ways by different adult observers.

#### *2.5.4 Developmental discourse*

The developmental discourse of play not only focuses on cognitive aspects of play, but also the benefits of play for social, emotional and physical development. Vygotsky (1978) believed play is a central part of children's development and play behaviour is a way in which a child can practice existing skills and acquire new ones. This discourse recognises that much of children's play is social and relies on interaction with other children. Duncan and Tarulli (2003) argue that through play children develop relationships and become conscious of themselves through, and because of, the actions and reactions other children display towards them. Consequently play contributes to children

developing an understanding of who they are and how their personality is perceived by others. Vygotsky (1966) considered that play is a 'leading activity' for children because in play children demonstrate their understanding of social roles, social rules and aspects of social organisation. Children play within the boundaries of their knowledge, but then also use play to push those boundaries, experiment with ideas and discover new ways of doing things. Vygotsky (1966) recognised that although play may not be the predominant activity for pre-school children it is a leading source of development. He stated, 'the child moves forward essentially through play activity' (Vygotsky, 1966, p16). Vygotsky also acknowledged the affective drive of play that allows children's imagination to be linked to developing confidence within a play situation. He suggested that confidence could also be developed more generally through mastery of a skill or task.

According to Vygotsky, the potential of play for cognitive development lies in the way that it can suspend reality and liberate children from the immediate constraints of real life situations; opening opportunities to explore pretend characters or objects:

'As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development' (Vygotsky, 1978, p102).

Finally, he believed that for very young children, the motivation to play was not intrinsic, but created from cultural influences, dependent upon adult guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). The influence of culture and social interaction in all contexts of play is widely acknowledged as significant, however, the belief that children are not intrinsically motivated to play is a contested view.

#### *2.5.5 Children's intrinsic motivation for play*

Hughes (2001) argues that the essence of play is based on children's intrinsic desire and curiosity. He believes that play is something that children have to do and can be evidenced through children's interactions with different opportunities and their motivation to use those opportunities to satisfy their curiosity. In a similar way Moyles (2005) considers that children are not either in play or out of play, but they are more or less playing in different degrees at all times and Sutton Smith (1997) views play as a lifelong activity that can occur at any age.

In this thesis play is considered as a continuum of opportunities where children incorporate the world around them, stimulating qualities such as curiosity, creativity and inventiveness. The process of play can also evoke strong emotional responses depending on the play situation and can be a positive and/or negative experience for children. Whalen (1995) maintains that children explore a sense of who they are, especially as they develop relationships with their peers and explore social situations together through play. A play situation may not always be a comfortable space for children as they may feel the need to conform to what their peers are saying or doing, for example they may feel pressured to 'prove' themselves in risk orientated play.

Hughes (2001) argues that play has two main interlocking characteristics, the first is that play has an immediate impact on the children involved. It is something that they engage in to make sense of their own situation and the context they are in. The reasoning for play may not always be apparent to onlookers or indeed for other children involved in the same play, but Hughes identifies that this can be attributed to play being intrinsically motivated where children have a desire to play. Moyles (2005, p3) agrees that children have a 'natural inclination to play alongside a natural instinct to learn and be curious and inventive'. The second characteristic identified by Hughes is that play has a wider influence which is a transpersonal characteristic. A play experience can impact on what



children are feeling or doing 'in the moment' but also relates to what has happened in the past, where children draw on previous experiences to inform what they are doing in their play. Children's experiences may also inform how they play in the future; triggering reactions based on previous play encounters. Therefore recognising and implementing play at the centre of all early years practice can support developing a play 'history' for children, built on play memories, which can be recreated or revisited at a later date.

## **2.6 The early years practitioners role**

Policy and curriculum guidance such as the English Statutory Framework for the Early Years (DfE, 2014) have a significant influence on what early years practitioners do in practice. Currently, the way that practitioners support children is shaped by 'top down' perspectives which reaffirm initiatives and thinking about early years education as adult-directed and outcome driven. However, early years practitioners are part of a strong community of practice where the value of play and child-centred practice is recognised (Andrews, 2012). As such, a community of practice built on experience, awareness of influences on children outside of the setting, liaising with parents and other professionals supports a collective of professionals able to influence others. Stephen (2010, p19) recognises that this influence is 'often implicit and that it shapes practitioner theories-in-action in ways that compete with or override ideas' encountered through a changing political climate. Therefore the discourse of play that an individual or community of practice aligns itself with will influence the practice that underpins children's play experiences regardless of the 'top down' structures practitioners work within (Katz, 1998; Broadhead, 2010).

Beliefs and values about children's play are not always openly articulated in early years settings. Sutton Smith (1997) argues that this means that play does not have a clear identity. The term 'play' becomes the word used to describe every eventuality, planned or

unplanned and Stephen (2010) advocates developing an evidenced-based rationale for play that will allow practitioners to be clear about its benefits and role in the early years curriculum. To some extent recording the characteristics of play children demonstrate is a step towards an evidence-based approach, but in isolation this appears superficial without the recognition of context and sociocultural influences. Hughes (2006) argues that supporting a play characteristic discourse almost inevitably leads to an outcome-focused view of play as the strategies practitioners employ to create opportunities may concentrate on play that supports only a limited set of skills or play behaviours.

Observations of the processes and intricacies of children's play behaviour, however, can reveal their personal motivations, hopes and fears, aspects of their personality and level of skill and development (Duncan and Tarulli, 2003). Facilitating play and recognising the sometimes very subtle cues that children show during play requires exceptionally skilled practitioners who know the children they are working with really well (Pramling Samuelsson and Fler, 2008). Being an effective facilitator of children's play requires understanding the balance between non-directive practice and the purpose and intention of adult intervention. In practice, Kalliala (2006) argues that this means practitioners need to observe and listen to children when they are engaged in play and provide both the physical, social and emotional space for children to make choices and use their initiative. Leont'ev (1981, p368) states that play 'is the only activity in which the motive of play does not lie in its result, but in the content of action itself'. Consequently Kalliala (2009) suggests that practitioners should see themselves as 'activators' of children's interests, initially being involved to encourage play between children, or in a particular area of the setting, but then allowing play to develop as children follow their interests. As an 'activator' practitioners have power to direct children's play but Kalliala (2009) warns that practitioners must be skilled in knowing when to 'activate' and when to enable children to initiate their own play.

The early years practitioner who strives for a child centred environment, recognising the significance of giving children time and space to develop their play, can begin to develop an informed understanding of children's unique qualities and their interests on which to base further play experiences and learning opportunities (Broadhead, 2006). However, basing early years practice on following children's ideas and motivations requires practitioners to place play at the centre of their practice, valuing and trusting in the process. Guilbaud (2003) argues that the essence of play is realised when children are trusted to make their own decisions, to test out new ideas and to enter their own play world. But the ability to see play through a child's eyes is a skill which requires experience, the ability to reflect on practice as well as knowledge and understanding of the child's background, their personality and their individual needs (Moyle, 2005). Consequently, supporting children's play requires careful consideration of the environment, children's individual needs, the relationships that are already established and those that emerge or develop through play.

#### *2.6.1 Listening to children*

Child directed or child centred play allows children a degree of freedom and the ability to personally direct what they are doing. They are given a sense of autonomy, controlling what they do, how they do it and when to stop or change their play. Creating an ethos based on following children's ideas and motivations requires practitioners to trust children and value their play. Child directed play can be unpredictable and giving children a say in what they do means someone has to listen, take on board what children say and be prepared to respond sensitively and appropriately (Canning, 2012). Consequently, practitioners who place play at the centre of practice need to be flexible in their approach and facilitate a space that allows play to develop and develop in a way that the child intends. Therefore the wealth of insights into a child's individual qualities and experiences that play can generate should not be underestimated. These considerations form the

basis for recognising that children have a capacity for developing ways of seeing the world, problem solving, learning and developing 'meaning making' in their play.

An important aspect of supporting play is to recognise children's choices and reflect on why those choices have been made to inform future planning. Listening to children's views is vital in establishing a child centred environment. However, Greene and Hill (2005, p18) identify that 'it is important not to just pay lip-service to the idea of listening to children or exploiting what is learnt from children about their lives in ways that meet the adult agenda only'. Consequently practitioner's need to be aware, not just about how they listen to children, but also be clear about the rationale for advocating children's autonomy and voice.

The wider community has also influenced the rationale for focusing on the child at the centre of the play process and listening and responding to their play needs. In the next section the notion of an empowering community is explored, together with a consideration of the social implications of empowerment and the influence that change within and outside the community can have on the process of being empowered.

#### *2.6.2 An empowering community*

The way in which communities facilitate empowering experiences is argued as being significant in fostering children's socialisation, participation and engagement in everyday activities so that these skills are practised and continue to develop during play (Rivera and Tharp, 2006). The idea that empowerment can become solely focused on the individual, whilst ignoring the social dimensions which support the structures and processes surrounding empowerment is inconceivable according to social work author To (2009). Jiang et al., (2011) argue that there is a need to find a balance between focusing on empowering individuals and empowering a group of people and that both need to be

taken into consideration and work together to energise individuals and to create collective responses in supporting the overall process of empowerment.

Underlying power relationships which exist between individuals, social contexts and the wider community are significant in understanding how empowering processes can be sustained. Page and Czuba (1999) argue that both individuals and communities need to be open to change and that if power is static, consistently held by one or the other then empowerment is not conceivable in a meaningful way. Power can expand or be shared, based on common experiences and individuals coming together to achieve a goal or to make something happen.

Change is also a key element in the argument that empowerment is generated from within a community. The professional community considered as the 'Early Years sector' has experienced many changes over the last decade with a workforce that has been required to adapt on a regular basis, but change can be unsettling and is often seen as a *dis*-empowering experience. Katz (1998) argues that if change is enforced through 'top-down' perspectives derived from political thinking and policy change then individuals may feel dis-empowered through the lack of engagement with the ideology or reasoning for change. She considers that only when individuals are involved in a 'bottom-up' approach can they become part of an empowering process. However, it may be more complex than that because adopting new practices or changing existing ones requires a significant shift in adults' thinking and conceptualising children's play and pedagogy (Ailwood, 2011). She argues that there exists a web of power relations that provide complexity and ambiguity in thinking about how individuals, groups and communities are empowered and how they co-exist alongside each other in everyday practice.

In contributing to a shift in practitioner's thinking, the thesis aims to develop a definition of empowerment that will contribute to a conceptual framework of identifying children's

empowerment in play. The next section in this chapter outlines the initial thinking towards a definition of empowerment which was influenced by the data collected in the pilot study and informed by the literature in this chapter.

## **2.7 Towards a definition of empowerment**

The pilot study entitled 'What factors contribute to children's empowerment in child-initiated social play?' (conducted in June 2011) reviewed video footage of 2-4 year old children in child-initiated, social play situations in three different early years settings. Further details of the pilot study are outlined in chapter 4.1 however, from the pilot the beginnings of a definition of empowerment for children engaged in child-initiated, social play started to take shape. The limited amount of data analysed from the pilot study signposted towards two main factors supporting the process of empowerment: human factors focusing on the social and emotional investment needed by children to participate in play and material factors focusing on how children engage with the environment and resources available to them.

### ***2.7.1 Human factors***

The play behaviours from the pilot study associated with human factors supporting a process of empowerment include children taking risks, having their contributions valued and being able to express their views. Children may challenge themselves through pushing their physical limits or encourage other children to try something new in order to sustain a play situation. Ball et al., (2008) argue that children have an active appetite for risk and will seek out ways in which they test their physical boundaries. In taking risks, Gill (2007) suggests that children develop a better understanding of their physical environment and what they can achieve, giving them confidence to try something new or set themselves a challenge. Risk taking also motivates children to engage with other children, challenge themselves and access new experiences through being determined to

achieve their goals. Becoming involved in established social play is also an emotional risk children take in joining in for the first time or expressing their interest in case they are rejected by an established group of children. Neihart (1999) explains emotional risk as an individual and conscious decision to be in a position open to rejection and vulnerability. Emotional risk taking is sometimes more challenging to identify in young children's play because it is often understated and personal to the child (Ilardo, 1992). However it is potentially more rewarding if their risk is consequently repaid through being accepted and being able to participate in different play situations.

Taking an emotional risk also involves expressing opinions and although many children find this straightforward in play situations, having contributions valued by other children can be challenging, especially in a large group of children. Children can use a range of different modes of expression and communication with peers to show their preferences, but Buckley (2003) considers that both interactive and constructive actions from children are also important. This is because when children are engaged with their immediate surroundings they are focused and involved in play that helps them to develop their social awareness, listening and sharing skills. They are actively involved in play and co-constructing meaning from what they are doing (Buckley, 2003).

### *2.7.2 Material factors*

The material factors that the pilot study highlighted as significant for children's empowerment included the places and spaces where children play, the materials and equipment that are available to them and using those materials in different and creative ways.

Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argue that the context of children's experiences and how they make sense of what they are doing contributes to creative play

experiences. Children have the capacity to adapt the resources and space they have to explore and experiment with ideas. Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p1) explains that 'creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives...most of the things that are interesting, important and human are the results of creativity'. It is not surprising that the material factors of children's play are closely linked with creativity as it plays a central role in children's interactions with their environment, their peers and the different adults that they come into contact with. Children experiment with new thoughts and ideas and are curious to find out new things; they do this predominantly through playing with the resources available to them and exploring their environment. Jeffrey and Craft (2006) see children's engagement with creativity involving open adventures where children explore and develop knowledge and learning through trial and error. As a result, Sawyer (1997) considers children's play as a series of improvisations which are created on the spot and perpetuated by the interplay between children, their environment and resources.

The environment is central to children's play and Rogers (2000) argues that for any creativity to emerge it needs to be nourishing and nurturing, which promotes a culture of openness for new play opportunities to develop. The play environment supports children's exploration and curiosity allowing potential for following interests and experimenting with ideas. Rogers (2000) also suggests that connections are made while children play, stimulating opportunities for self-expression, problem solving, communication and building social relationships. Play is about making meaningful connections and using ideas and resources in new ways. This not only supports sharing experiences with others, but widens children's ability to feel able to participate. Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) agree that in children's play they find ways to symbolise and use objects that are meaningful to them. They argue that play puts a variety of demands on children, especially when they are engaged in a sustained form of creative play. For example, they have to remember what they have previously negotiated in their



play and what different objects and materials are supposed to be. This is where the human factors outlined above and material factors of play come together signifying that they are integrated and co-dependent.

As a result of the pilot study analysis an initial definition of empowerment is outlined here, taking into consideration the sociocultural influence and power relationships that exist within children's play in different contexts.

## **2.8 A working definition of empowerment**

*Empowerment in child-initiated, social play is not one single action, event or circumstance.*

*It is concerned with the connection between human factors such as taking risks, having contributions valued and being able to express views and material factors such as the play environment, the resources within it and how materials are used in different and creative ways. These are components that contribute to young children's experiences of a process of empowerment.*

The literature and pilot study analysis has supported the first steps towards a definition of empowerment which will be further developed as a result of the research focusing on child-initiated, social play in this thesis. Children's play experiences underpin the arguments made throughout the study and are integral to contributing to the complexities of children's empowerment in play.

## **2.9 Summary**

In this chapter the nature of empowerment has been considered alongside the complexities of power relationships that exist within early years contexts, between adults and children and in child-child relationships. The pedagogical approach to play in UK

early years settings has been explored and children's right to play has also been considered. Three main discourses of play have been discussed and the role of the early years practitioner in supporting children's play has been analysed through the chapter. The chapter has concluded with an initial working definition of empowerment, based on the literature supporting children's play experiences and considering the factors required to engage in a process of empowerment.

In the next chapter the theoretical framework used to underpin the research is examined and analysed in relation to the methodological choices made to gather the empirical data.

### **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework**

This chapter considers the theoretical framework of the research that situates children's play within a sociocultural perspective. The interpretative nature of the research and some of the challenges this has posed are explored, alongside the rationale for the case study approach and the methodological choices made throughout the study. The chapter acknowledges the significance of positioning the researcher at the centre of the research process and discusses how this may have influenced the overall internal validity and reliability of the study.

#### **3.1 Sociocultural perspective**

The positioning of child-initiated, social play and children's empowerment within the context of the early years is based upon a sociocultural theoretical framework.

Sociocultural theory is founded on the ideas of Vygotsky (1896-1934), who considered that social interaction between two or more people facilitates learning and development. He maintained that thinking and the generation of new knowledge occurs first on the social plane (between adults and children or between children engaged in joint sociocultural activity), and later on the individual plane (within each child) through a process of internalisation. Vygotsky (1978) employed the concept of 'internalisation' to explain how thinking originally generated between people through dialogue (or inter-mental functioning) can later transform the thinking of the individual (intra-mental functioning). As well as acknowledging the fundamental importance of dialogue and interaction for learning and development, Vygotsky also argued that the development of higher mental functions, such as thinking, language and memory have their roots in culturally specific psychological 'tools' and symbolic systems, which supports the development of common understanding and knowledge creation between people.

Sociocultural approaches, therefore, emphasise the interdependence between cultural contexts and social interaction in developing knowledge and understanding. Vygotsky (1978) argued that all human activity is motivated by, and takes place in cultural contexts that are developed through the ways in which people communicate and their actions towards each other. He argued that each individual holds a personal cultural connection or history that shapes their thinking, values and beliefs. Individuals' thinking processes are expressed consciously and unconsciously when interacting with others and exchanging views. Therefore individuals develop an understanding of who they are, where they have come from (i.e. their family history), and what they believe in within a specific cultural context. Thus, cultural understanding and influences are created, maintained and perpetuated through expectations and experiences passed on from generation to generation. Rogoff (2003, p368) argues that 'culture is not just something other people do, but is about understanding our own cultural heritage, perspectives and beliefs as well as being open to a consideration of the needs of people with contrasting backgrounds'.

Within different social and cultural contexts there are common practices that occur based on unquestioned assumptions about how things are done or roles that different people occupy. Corsaro (2005) suggests that these assumptions shape children's cultural understanding and influence their contribution to the adult world. Common or taken for granted practices are often reaffirmed through actual experiences: what has been seen or heard or emphasised through pictures or stories. Therefore, how children relate to the world is largely a function based on what they know of their own cultural context and the influence of wider societal norms (Greene and Hill, 2005). Drawing on sociocultural theory, the research reported in this thesis maintains that children should be viewed as active participants in their communities although it is clear that they are affected by the decisions and practices of adults. Nevertheless, children are also viewed as being able to influence what matters to them through their actions and through being offered the

opportunity for their opinion and views to count (James and James, 2004). Children's position within society, therefore, can change as their community changes or thinking develops. For this reason, Rogoff (2003) views sociocultural theory as something that constantly evolves as society changes.

### *3.1.1 Situating play in a sociocultural approach*

Vygotsky (1978) believed that play is socially situated and is dependent upon the context of the play environment. In a play situation children have opportunities to think in more complex ways because of the variety of factors that can be influential and unpredictable. For example, the way in which children use the environment can influence the direction of their play and the use of resources within that environment can be used by children in ways that have just not occurred to adults. Therefore Vygotsky (1966) recognised play as an important tool to support children's intellectual and social development, emphasising the way children's imagination could be linked to developing confidence through practising skills.

“In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour: in play he is, as it were, a head above himself” (Vygotsky, 1978, p74)

He also maintained that the benefits of play for children offers them opportunities to suspend reality and liberate themselves from the immediate constraints of real life situations; and this opens opportunities for the exploration of pretend characters, events or objects. As Bodrova (2008) points out, when children play they act in accordance with ideas they have generated and are motivated to explore through their play rather than consciously applying reality. For instance, when children are engaged in symbolic play, they might use an object for a purpose different to its original function, for example using a hairbrush to symbolise a microphone. Children play within real world constructions, for example, understanding the functions of a microphone, but use pretend situations to

develop their play. Children's ability to suspend reality when they are engaged in play and to sustain that suspension for the duration of the play supports Vygotsky's contention that the significance of imagination and cognition is realised where reality, creativity and imagination coincide.

Rogoff's (2003) work investigates children's participation in cultural activities and focuses on three levels of analysis, the personal, the interpersonal and the institutional. In this thesis it is argued that these levels may also be used to position play within sociocultural theory. The personal level looks at children's participation within a given play context and explores how individual children choose to participate at different points within an activity. An individual child's involvement may transform the nature of the play, by influencing other children through what they do or say. The social engagement experienced by individual children is significant, in as much as they have made a personal investment in the interaction, and their contribution also influences the rest of the children involved in the play situation. The second level of analysis considers the significance of interpersonal relationships and collaborations that are developed through play and how these support both children's social development, as well as their learning. The third level recognises that when play takes place within an institution such as an early years nursery or pre-school, it can also be interpreted in its broadest sense as representing the practices of a particular community or cultural context. This implies that the nature of children's play behaviour is strongly influenced by what they know and understand about acceptable or approved social interactions and boundaries.

Vygotsky (1966) considered that all play situations have rules attached to them, and that these are understood by children either from direct experiences or from the rules being taught and reinforced in an early years setting or at home. Vygotsky argued that as rules are grounded within communities and cultures, where children have developed a shared understanding of acceptable ways of doing things, this would be evident in the choices

they make within their play. Vygotsky (1966, p 6) stated that even 'imaginary situations already contain rules of behaviour although this is not a game with formulated rules in advance'. Therefore whatever children imagine an object to be or however they use their play environment this will always be subject to rules drawn from their understanding of their cultural context.

### **3.2 Learning**

Vygotsky formulated a 'genetic law of cultural development' to account for learning and development. This has two main components; the social or inter-mental plane and the individual or intra-mental plane (Vygotsky, 1981, p191). As outlined above, the individual plane develops after the social plane, when an idea or thought process originally shared in the social plane is reflected upon and internalised by the individual so that it becomes meaningful and relevant in a personal context. He explained:

"...every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an inter-mental category, then within the child as an intra-mental category...We are justified in considering the thesis presented as a law, but it is understood that the transition from outside inward transforms the process itself, changes its structure and functions (Vygotsky, 1997, p106)

Vygotsky also proposed that both the social and individual plane is influenced by cultural traditions. He acknowledged the dynamic relationship between individual and social environments to support learning, and developed the notion of a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). He defined a 'zone' as the distance between the level of actual development and the more advanced level of potential development that comes into existence in interaction between more and less capable participants. An essential aspect

of this interaction is that less capable participants can be encouraged to participate in forms of interaction that they would not normally attempt when acting alone and can therefore gain confidence in practising new skills which can accelerate their learning. Researchers have built on Vygotsky's ideas to form apprenticeship models of learning which involve peers working closely with a teacher or expert in joint problem solving (Brown et al., 1989). In joint activity individuals at first rely on others with more experience, but over time take on increased responsibility and develop confidence in their own learning and participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The context of the learning experience is central to the extent to which an individual can engage with others and feel comfortable and confident to participate in joint activity. In this thesis it is argued that close observation of young children's social play can reveal firstly their understanding of their immediate cultural context. Secondly, in terms of empowerment, I hope to demonstrate how social play allows children to grow and develop confidence and ownership of their own learning. The next section discusses the more recent work of Rogoff (1990, 2003) who has elaborated and refined Vygotsky's original ideas and thinking.

### *3.2.1 Guided participation*

Rogoff (1990) characterises the idea of joint activity as guided participation, and documents children's varying forms of participation with parents and peers. She found that even if children were not directly involved in conversations with adults, they were influenced by their physical environment and the interactions of others. Children's participation in daily routines provides them with opportunities to observe and become skilled in activities which reflect and perpetuate their culture. Rogoff (1991, p351) states that 'through repeated and varied experiences in supported routine and challenging situations, children become skilled practitioners in the specific cognitive activities in their communities'. Consequently, children not only participate in a wide variety of joint



activities, but also start to learn how to acquire strategies for undertaking tasks and developing knowledge about how to act and react in social situations.

Rogoff (2003) recognises that a child's cultural background can also shape their preferences. She explains that not only are children alert to learning from the cultural opportunities and reactions of others around them, but also that children's relationships with other children and adults shape their future experiences. Therefore situations where children meet other children are influential in providing positive opportunities for social interaction and learning. The relationships that children form with other children through friendship are significant as these relationships can develop across a number of different contexts and contribute to the experiences children encounter. Children's interactions in social play situations are particularly significant to the research because they are integral in understanding the process of empowerment in play. The next section considers how children's interactions are understood through an interpretive paradigm.

### **3.3 Interpretive paradigm**

The research reported in this thesis takes an interpretive stance, where human action is understood and interpreted within the context of social practices (Hammersley, 1998). The knowledge and understanding developed through taking this approach is always entwined with different views and opinions because the actions of children and adults can be seen from different perspectives. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) point out that the subjectivity of the paradigm can be considered as problematic because the data generated captures only a moment in time, and that the particular combination of variables operating in that moment may not occur in the same way or in the same context ever again. In terms of drawing generalised conclusions about social activity, therefore, the reliability and validity of the research may be questioned as appropriate. This thesis argues, however, that it is not possible to understand the subjective meaning and

significance of a multi-faceted activity such as social play for a particular set of individuals by following the set of research criteria commonly applied to empirical studies. An interpretive paradigm considers how people construct knowledge and meaning that allows the researcher to build a contextual narrative of their experiences (Lofland et al., 2006). Building the links between experiences and gaining multiple perspectives supports the researcher in making sense of the data generated through the research.

This paradigm involves dialogue between the different perspectives that develop through the situated contexts of research. The different perspectives may then be organised into themes or what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) consider 'truths' of the research, which may be analysed in relation to the context of the research to support the development of knowledge and understanding. However knowledge created in an interpretive paradigm is constantly evolving as interpretations are always situated within a context, are largely incomplete, and because of this, ambiguous (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The interpretive paradigm acknowledges that, observations can never be value free or independent of interpretation, and recognises that there is no single 'truth'. Instead, knowledge and understanding are socially constructed through the ideas that people construct which in turn are generated in response to cultural trends (Ailwood, 2010). This is an appropriate theoretical framework for this study because children's actions and reactions in play situations can never be observed completely value free and as outlined in literature review the terms 'play' and 'empowerment' are also ambiguous and subject to interpretation. An interpretative paradigm has framed the methodological choices that underpin the design and analytic strategy reported in this thesis which are considered in the next section.

### **3.4 Methodological choices: Qualitative research**

This section outlines the methodological choices that have informed the research design, and provides a rationale for employing a case study approach to frame the data. It considers the position of the researcher and explains how locating the research within a qualitative and ethnographic approach, (as informed by the interpretivist paradigm outlined above), influences the research.

There was a conscious decision to adopt a qualitative and ethnographic approach to the study. In exploring children's play and empowerment, the nature of the research required consideration of the meanings that emerge from their experiences and perspectives on play, both through direct observation of their actions and interactions with other children, and also through the views of other people closely associated with the children. The research was primarily concerned with the context of children's play; but this also involved understanding their daily lives and cultures, observing their interactions and listening to them. The research needed to be flexible, led by the children's play choices and by fitting in with the early years settings' daily routine and the children's home life. Qualitative research provided the platform for exploring children's social worlds, the realities of their play and how they made and sustained connections with other children. Ely et al., (1991) consider that events can only be understood if they are seen in context and the context of children's play was central to the study, permeating through each aspect of analysis, reflection and discussion. The study aimed to understand children's individual and group actions and decisions based on their interactions with other children; to build an ethnographic account of children's social play in order to develop an explanation of how it might contribute to children's empowerment. Exploring the social worlds of children, the cultural influences upon them, and on their actions and ideas contributed to understanding the wider context of children's play and empowerment. It also led to an examination of the norms and values associated with particular individuals and groups such as early years

practitioners and parents and the significance of this in relation to the study (James et al., 1998).

The ethnographic nature of the study situated the understanding of children's play through the connections that might emerge between different perspectives on children's lived experiences. Interviews with parents and early years practitioners supported 'knitting together threads of evidence' (Brooker, 2002, p84) to generate qualitative data which was meaningful in the context of the child and that contributed to understanding the cultural traditions existing within their family and early years settings. The thesis argues that looking at the underlying cultural connections between children, their families and the early years setting was significant in terms of gaining an understanding of the broader social philosophy and values around the subject of children's play and its role in their development.

### **3.5 Positioning as a researcher**

As outlined above, the approach taken to the study of play and empowerment was interpretive, and considered the social play actions of children within the context of existing and established social practices. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) warn that an interpretive approach may produce a one sided view as the study may be compromised by the 'blinkered' perspective of the researcher. However, the thesis argues that the very nature of the interpretive paradigm created a web of perspectives throughout the study between the process of data gathering and the relationships, which developed between the researcher, settings, children and parents. The multiple perspectives that emerged through the research contributed to a reflexive process of analysis; systematically questioning what was seen and heard to find patterns and themes in the data. This approach supported in some way the internal validity and reliability of the data.

In questioning my own position as a researcher I was able to reflect on how the data might be viewed by others and how my potential bias could influence the research findings. Consequently, Weber (1964) believed that in order to understand the wider implications for society, it is important to consider the meanings attached to individual actions. He suggests that attempting to analyse the underlying intentions of those actions and the choices and decisions that appear to inform them at the time, is significant in understanding behaviour. Weber argues that for a researcher it is unavoidable to draw on personal cultural values when interpreting children's play actions and choices and making connections with parents and early years practitioners' views. Consequently the choices made for the study, conscious and unconscious became entwined in the interpretive nature of the research. If Weber's argument is to be accepted, therefore, it is better to accept that 'reality can never be independent of the person researching it' (Pring, 2000, p45) and to acknowledge and reflect on the researcher's influence than to deny its existence. In this way, I acknowledge that the decisions about the research method and design were shaped by my own personal ethnography and influenced by my particular cultural beliefs and values (Crotty, 1998). I am in agreement with Stake (1995, p45) when he argues that:

'The intent of qualitative researchers to promote a subjective research paradigm is a given. Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding'.

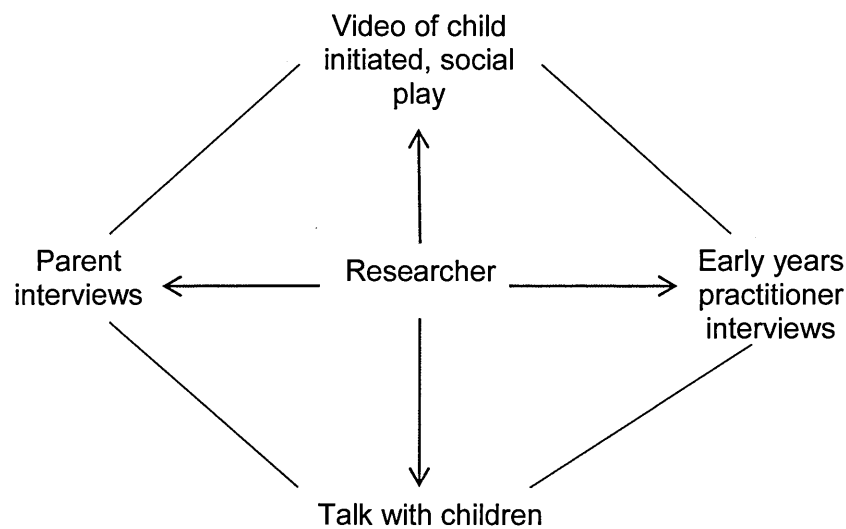
Throughout the research I acknowledge my influence in the decisions and formulation of the research design and my subjectivity in the collection and interpretation of data. I recognise my impact on the whole process, yet conducted the research with integrity and awareness of my potential to influence the findings. I would argue that the attention to methodological detail in the way the research was conducted, and the multimodal nature

of the data collected and analysed went some way to balancing the interpretive nature of the study. This is elaborated upon in the next section.

3.5.1 Internal validity and reliability

The integrity of the methods used to collect the data and the positioning of the researcher were central to the study. The context of the research, the culture specific nature of the case studies, the geographical location of the study and the socio-economic status of families were acknowledged as bound by the constraints and timeframe of the research. However the triangulation of the data and multimodal nature of analysis supported the internal validation of the study (Dicks et al., 2011; Flewitt, 2006).

Figure 3.1: Researcher at the centre of the process



The multimodal approach provided a framework for analysis through the collection of visual and oral data (Kress, 2009). Accordingly a case study approach was used, (detailed in the next section), as this allowed the researcher to gain multiple viewpoints from parents, practitioners and the children themselves on how they experienced social play. Central to this was the development of relationships between the researcher and

participants and involved through the video and interview data an insight into children's lives, their family circumstances and influences.

In qualitative research Silverman (2001) argues that triangulation ignores the context-bound nature of collected data and therefore it cannot be representative of a single objective truth. Silverman suggests that constant comparison and comprehensive data treatment are more likely to result in validity. In this study a rigorous coding system supported the analytic strategy throughout the research. This ensured that alternative interpretations were considered rather than applying researcher assumptions (see chapter 6.4 on reliability testing of the operational codes). The validity of the study was also supported through constant reflection of the potential impact of my reactivity and bias to the data.

It could be argued that the use of multiple case studies meant that the flexibility of the design was open to multiple alternative interpretations of the data, thus Robson (2002, p176) warns that 'researchers need to be thorough, careful and honest in carrying out research', but also able to show others that this is the case. I would argue, therefore, that the reliability of the research was supported by adopting a rigorous approach to ensuring consistency in coding decisions, by clearly outlining the rationale for those decisions and by justifying the methods adopted for the study. As Silverman (2001) suggests, providing clear and comprehensive detail in these areas provides a measure of reliability that should enable other researchers to replicate the project.

### **3.6 Case study approach**

Multiple case studies were chosen as a method to answer the two empirical research questions: 1) in what ways can child-initiated, social play empower children? and 2) what is a valid and useful conceptual definition of children's empowerment in play?. Case

studies enabled the research to focus on children's play and strategies children employed to interact with their peers. They also provided the opportunity to consider a wider perspective of the social and cultural context in which children's play occurred. The multiple data gathered from different perspectives (children, parents, and early years practitioners) supported the situated understanding of the realities of children's play experiences to explore empowerment. The study followed typical features of case study identified by Yin (2009) by involving a small number of cases, examining them within a given context and being able to consider a full variety of evidence to support 'how' and 'why' questions. The research also looked for commonalities between the case study children's play, aligned with the perspectives of parents and early years practitioners to support the research findings (Stake, 1995). In adopting case study methods, intensive knowledge was gained about the children's play, their preferences and support network which supported a holistic approach to understanding social and cultural influences on their lives (Stake, 1995). Case studies seek patterns of unanticipated as well as expected relationships (Yin, 2009) and the research was responsive to situations; sensitive in interpreting developing events and in pursuing emerging issues.

In terms of generalisability, Simons (1996) considers that case studies offer ways in which to construct understanding and learning from the evidence presented. She argues that 'by studying the uniqueness of the particular, we come to understand the universal' (Simons, 1996, p230). Thus, by finding more out about particular children's lives through a multimodal approach (Dicks et al., 2011), interviewing parents and practitioners, by observing children in different contexts and by engaging children to think about their experiences through talking to them; it was hoped that commonalities would be established between the various cases that would allow a more comprehensive understanding of children's empowerment in play. Studying play from more than one standpoint supported a detailed exploration of the research questions and permitted coordination of the data to 'map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of



human behaviour' (Cohen et al., 2007, p254). However, the evaluations of the process at every stage of the research, within case studies and across case studies were challenging; in particular, ensuring that parity had been given to each child, the settings they attended and their home context. Yin (2012) suggests that these difficulties can be overcome to some extent by following systematic procedures that enable analytic generalisations to be made so that the research can be authentically re-produced. Although case study research often relies on description and narrative for reporting, the systematic approach to coding the data from the videos and interviews employed in this research allowed for cross case comparisons to be made (Cohen et al., 2007). By using multiple units of analysis in multiple case design (Yin, 2012), I argue that the study became a 'step to action' (Cohen et al., 2000, p184) in relation to early years practice and understanding of children's empowerment.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter has considered the theoretical framework applied to the research and situated children's play within a sociocultural perspective. The interpretative nature of the research has been explored alongside the reasoning for the case study approach and the methodological choices made throughout the study. The chapter has recognised the significance of positioning the researcher at the centre of the research process and the impact this has had on the overall internal validity and reliability of the study.

In the next chapter the methodology for the thesis will be discussed in more detail including data generation methods, the context of the research and the ethical implications for the study.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the data gathering methods of the research and the significance of placing the child at the centre of the research process. The importance of the pilot study in finalising the data gathering methods for the research is explained alongside the practical aspects of collecting the data and keeping a reflective diary.

The data collection for the research was carried out over a three month period (June-August 2012). The non-participant observations through video recordings, interviews with parents and practitioners and finally talk with the seven case study children brought together data which provided an insight into children's play experiences. Analysis of those data considered children's empowerment in answering the research questions:

1. In what ways can child-initiated, social play empower children?
2. What is a valid and useful conceptual definition of children's empowerment in play?
3. How can articulating the significance of children's empowerment in play support early years practice?

### **4.1 Influence of the pilot study**

The final decisions on the methods used in the research derived from the pilot study (June, 2011) that involved three Ofsted registered early years settings: a childminder, a charity based Children's Centre and a private day nursery. Three visits of three hour sessions to each setting (a total of 9 visits) were conducted over a period of six weeks. The pilot study focused on the question: 'What factors contribute to children's empowerment in child-initiated social play?' however, the real value in the pilot study was the clarification of the following aspects for the main research:

- Age of the children - filming different aged children in the pilot study (2 ½ - 4 years) enabled the potential variations in the range of play that children engaged with and

the social interactions that naturally occur during play to be associated with age differences.

- Contexts of the research - the pilot explored different setting contexts that represent early years practice and opportunities for play. It provided opportunities to talk with early years practitioners to discuss the logistics of the main study and the implications of filming children's play.
- Talk with children – the pilot confirmed the significance of children's perspectives in the research and facilitated an exploration of different ways of acquiring children's views about their play through a variety of techniques.

It was important to carry out a pilot study because it enabled an evaluation of the research approaches outlined above. It assessed whether the research was realistic and workable and established whether the sampling frame and techniques were effective (Cargan, 2007). The pilot study was valuable in identifying practical challenges in researching with young children (Greene and Hill, 2005) and helped structure the main research data collection timetable. The pilot also helped to clarify the research questions and the data that would best support answering those questions. The data gathering methods used in the main research are discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

#### **4.2 Main research data gathering methods**

This section details the rationale for the various data collection methods adopted within the main study using a multiple case study framework. These are summarised as:

- Non-participant observations using video recordings of the seven case study children in their different early years settings and home context. The case study children were filmed when they were involved in child-initiated, social group play;

- Individual audio recorded and transcribed interviews with lead early years practitioners and key workers who supported the case study children in each of the four settings; interviews were conducted in their workplace;
- Individual audio recorded and transcribed interviews with parents of the case study children; interviews were conducted at their home;
- Talk with the seven case study children about their play preferences; audio recorded and transcribed and conducted after the filming for the research had finished. Talk with the individual case study children took place in their early years setting with a practitioner or parent nearby;
- Researcher reflective diary completed during the data collection process, mainly after filming in the settings and interviews with parents and practitioners;
- Documents from each of the four settings regarding their philosophy and practice of a play-based curriculum.

#### *4.2.1 Children's choice at the centre of the research*

At the outset of the research it was important that children's perspectives about their play were represented as this is seen as being at the heart of understanding the process of children's empowerment. Although the data collection was primarily based on observation of children's play experiences through video, the analysis of their actions and reactions to the activity and to their peers as they engaged in child-initiated social play provided additional and complementary insights into the nature of their experiences. Video recordings of children's play were considered the most appropriate way of capturing children's play interactions, rather than relying on field notes or written observations, as these were able to be viewed multiple times and also could be considered by other professionals (Haw, 2008). Through video stimulated review with parents and practitioners; this meant that children's play experiences could be considered from

different perspectives. Thus, discussion and debate about children's choices and experiences were central to the research.

However, this also meant that the video data were open to interpretation and were produced or influenced by the choices by the researcher of what to film and when to film the case study children (Dahlberg et al., 2007). As discussed above, however, the advantage of video was that it enabled repeat viewing and opportunities for detailed analysis (by both the researcher, practitioner and parents). In this way, the interpretation of what children were doing when they played did not rest solely with the researcher. This supported an assessment of the reliability of the data and is discussed further in chapter 6.4.

In the past, researching children's views through video and audio techniques has been used successfully (Paley, 1988; Sawyer, 1997; Forman, 1999; Flewitt, 2006; Robson, 2011) and in some cases the incidents have been played back to children for their comments (MacNaughton, 1999; Robson, 2011). At the pilot study stage a number of techniques were experimented with to elicit children's perspectives about their own play. Burke, (2005) argues that the process of using different tools or methods with children in research can enhance understanding of children's lives, and capturing children's opinions about their play experiences can minimise bias and subjectivity of the interpretation of the video footage. Children are interested in all types of technology and image making and their lives are saturated with media influences from a very young age, therefore, they have skills in making meaning from video images (Burke, 2008; Robson, 2012). However, in the pilot study there were mixed responses from children when they were replayed video clips of themselves. As children were replayed video footage of themselves playing, they were asked:

- Can you see yourself on the video? Where are you? (the child would point to themselves on the screen)

- Who are you playing with?
- That looks like fun - what are you doing?

If a game involved a resource questions would include:

- What's that?
- What are you doing with it?

Some general questions included:

- What do you like most about the video?
- Who is your favourite person to play with?
- What do you like playing the most?

The video sequences were often replayed to the child several times and different strategies were employed to encourage children to try and express what they were doing when they played such as:

- inviting more than one child to view the video up to a maximum of three who had all appeared in the same clip;
- involving practitioners in the feedback session where they asked the children about their play;
- asking questions while the video was playing;
- stopping the video at different points and asking questions;
- playing the video through and then asking the child questions;
- repeating the video several times before asking the child questions;
- using the video to ask more general questions about children's likes and dislikes;
- asking the practitioner to be present at the feedback but not contribute;
- asking the children to explain to a teddy bear what they were doing when they were playing.

Forman (1999) suggests that although using video with children can help them to recall what they have been doing and potentially what those actions meant to them at the time, it requires a high level of thinking. In the pilot study, 'video stimulated review' and other techniques to talk with children were not particularly successful in terms of the quality of information gathered as the engagement with children about their play did not give a clear picture of their experiences. In the pilot study the ages of the children were:

- Children's centre – 4 children aged 4 years
- Childminder – 4 children aged 3 years
- Private day nursery – 2 children aged 2 ½ years

All of the children showed pleasure in watching themselves either on the laptop or TV screen. The youngest children from the private day nursery used more non-verbal cues such as waving their arms or pointing to the screen. They only nodded or shook their head when some of direct questions were asked. The older children from the childminder setting and children's centre could better express their views, but mainly answered with one word 'yes' or 'no' to direct questions and did not elaborate on what they were doing in their play even when different strategies were employed to elicit this information. The children from the children's centre were transfixed by seeing themselves on a larger TV screen and although they showed their interest in seeing the video of themselves, they did not offer explanation or elaborate further on what they were doing.

At the time this was disappointing as Robson (2012) considers that using images reflecting play that children have recently been involved in should stimulate children's reflections. She suggests this is especially true when they are videos of children's own play choices and set in contexts which are meaningful to them. The children in the pilot study perhaps lacked confidence to contribute further to the video footage or reflect on what they were doing and why. The experience of using these different ways to gain

children's views in the pilot study led to a conscious decision not to use video stimulated review with children in the main research. Instead parents and practitioners were involved in reviewing selected video sequences as part of their interviews. Abbot and Langston (2005, p37) consider research with young children is important, but state in their view that 'any research involving very young children, must also focus on those who live and work in a close relationship with them'. At the end of the data gathering, talk with the case study children about their play preferences took place (see chapter 7.8). It was important to offer children the opportunity to have their say, and to acknowledge their opinions about their play. The research centred on children's experiences and therefore it was significant for them to be part of the process in expressing their views about what they decided to do in their play and who they chose to play with. Gaining insight into the children's play preferences was more problematic. The video stimulated review with children in the pilot study did not provide any further understanding of children's choices and decision making during play situations. In discussion with the practitioners from the different settings, it was felt that the use of 'smiley faces' in a focused activity might be a better way for children to express their preferences. Having still photographs of their play was thought to provide more thinking time and space for children to reflect on what they liked to do best. The moving images of the video in the video stimulated review meant that events happened in quick succession and children perhaps found it hard to say how they felt about what was happening. The use of the photographs also allowed for more discussion between the researcher and case study children as further questions could be asked if a comment was made about a particular type of play or play resource.

#### *4.2.2 Non-participant observations - video recordings*

Participant observation is a common research tool used during case study research (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al., 2000; Stake, 1995), but it was not used in this study as the aim of the research was to explore child-initiated play without adult interaction. The video



recordings captured all of the play that the case study children were involved in during each visit and the multiple visits to different settings ensured that a variety of play was captured. In the cases of three of the children: Jessica, Matthew and Henry, play was filmed in more than one early years setting (see appendix F for a list of video sequences taken for each child in different contexts).

The main method of data collection in the study involved non-participant observations of seven children (4 boys and 3 girls) who were all 4 years old through filming child-initiated social play in different play contexts. The data captured social interactions of children in their everyday routine play activity through time sampled video footage. The video data were collected with a hand held digital video camera which had a built in timer visible on the side opening monitor. This allowed discreet filming to minimise children's awareness of the camera and for the camera to move with the children as they played. The camera also allowed still photographs from the video footage to be printed which formed the central part of talking with the case study children after the observations had been completed.

In each filming opportunity the camera was positioned a comfortable distance from the case study children and the zoom features of the camera helped minimize the impact of filming children's play. This was especially useful outside where children had access to a large space in three of the settings. The footage was concerned with the interactions of the children, rather than what they said and so the camera could be positioned at a distance to minimize any self-conscious play behaviour. It was important that the video was as non-intrusive as possible and that children were not distracted by the camera or filming. Adult influence in the children's play would have changed the dynamics; however, O'Reilly (2009) argues that all ethnographic observations involve some participation and even acting as if not there influences the situation being observed. She considers that non-participant observation is more about limited interaction. The presence of the video

camera to some extent had an effect on the children and early years practitioners, and perhaps made the children more self-aware in their play because in the first few minutes when the video was recording some children would ask why the video camera was there. Children were reminded of the orientation visit when they were able to look at the camera and ask questions about the research (see the discussion on ethics in chapter 5.4). Once an explanation had been given, children seemed satisfied to continue with their play. Over the visits to the different settings, children were less inquisitive and appeared to ignore the camera to a large extent.

#### *4.2.3 Time sampling*

Initial video recordings in the pilot study continuously filmed children's play, but this resulted in lengthy sequences of film that were difficult to organise and analyse. Using time sampling provided a focus for the observations that Wright (1960) considers important and argues that observations should have parameters and a structure. His research involved observing spontaneous and ongoing child behaviour in everyday life. In this study, the case study children were making decisions about what, who and where they played within the boundaries of a setting and the time sample provided an element of structure and organisation in gathering visual data.

The observations with the video camera were captured in approximately two minute time samples which Wright (1960) considers is the optimum time for this type of observation. The two minute time frame worked, as much of the children's play in all of the settings and home contexts seemed to arrive at a natural pause at this point, before the play developed further, came to a conclusion or turned into something else. If children's play continued beyond two minutes, the camera would be stopped and restarted immediately, providing a marker point. The camera recorded the majority of the case study children's

child-initiated social play in the observation sessions that were agreed with the practitioners and parents.

#### 4.2.4 Organisation of observations

Visits to the settings for filming were arranged to cover the expected attendance of the case study children and most of them had a regular attendance routine. Consequently visits to focus on individual case study children were made on the same day of the week, same session, week on week over a four week period. Each of the settings followed their own weekly routines and the filming fitted into the settings structure of activities. Each session in the different settings lasted approximately 2 ½ hours and consisted of either a morning or afternoon visit where video footage was captured when the case study children were engaged in child-initiated, social play. The actual play situations could not be planned and it meant that there could be no expectation about the amount of data that might be collected on each visit, or the type and situation of play that children would engage with. For example, it was the practitioners’ decision if play was inside or outside, for how long and the type of resources available to children. The table below outlines the video data collected in each of the four settings:

Figure 4.1: Amount of video data collected in each of the four settings

Setting	Total number of visits over a 4 week period	Case study children	Total length of filming captured
City centre Children’s Centre	4 visits	Ethan and Henry	1 hour 30 minutes
Rural private day nursery	4 visits	Luka, Abigail, Jessica and Matthew	2 hours 8 minutes
City centre private day nursery	4 visits	Max and Henry	1 hour 10 minutes

Setting	Total number of visits over a 4 week period	Case study children	Total length of filming captured
Childminder	2 visits	Jessica and Matthew	1 hour
Home environments	1 visit to each case study child (total of 7)	All	1 hour 30 minutes

Filming in the home of each of the seven case study children was arranged at the convenience of the parent and only one visit to the home environment to film was made for each of the case study children. In the home environment the video footage collected for each child was between 10 and 15 minutes and it was the child’s choice of where and what to play with, sometimes in negotiation with the parent.

*4.2.5 Early years practitioner and parent Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with early years practitioners and parents of the case study children to explore views, knowledge and understanding about children’s empowerment and its significance in contributing to children’s social and emotional development. The interviews were organised at different stages of the study so that views from practitioners and parents about empowerment could be established at the beginning of the research and could be reflected upon at the end, supported with video stimulated review from the video footage of children’s play (Forman, 1999).

All of the interviews were semi-structured, asking questions specific to issues of empowerment, but tailored to the context of the interviewees setting or child. Mishler (1986) describes interviews as having unequal power relationships between interviewer and interviewee and argues that the perception by the interviewee is that the interviewer has ‘all of the answers’ and therefore authority and power in an interview situation. Consequently, interviewees may try to tailor their answers to what they think the

interviewer wants to hear rather than being confident to express their own opinion. The interviews attempted to put the practitioner or parent at ease and ask questions directly relating to their knowledge about the focused case study child. Through seeking opinion rather than answering questions the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee were more balanced.

In the city centre private day nursery a number of different early years practitioners were involved in the interviews as the case study children had different key workers. The room leader participated in the first interview, whilst the key workers for the two children participated in separate second interviews. For the third interview, the key workers and room leader participated in separate interviews to review the video footage. These interviews allowed the collection of different views of practitioners with different levels of experience and knowledge of the case study children. In the childminder, rural private day nursery and city centre Children’s Centre, the practitioners interviewed were the same for all of the interviews. The schedule of interviews was designed to focus on the various aspects of the research:

Figure 4.2: Interviews with early years practitioners

Interview	Timing in the research	Purpose of interview	Participants
First	Beginning of the research	To explore what practitioners believe empowerment for children means and what it looks like in practice, using the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum as a starting point for the discussion.	City centre private day nursery – room leader City centre Children’s Centre – lead practitioner Rural private day nursery – room leader Childminder

Interview	Timing in the research	Purpose of interview	Participants
Second	Mid-point of the research schedule	To focus on the children participating in the case study and consider children's characters, preferences and areas for development in relation to social play.	City centre private day nursery – 2 different key workers City centre Children's Centre – lead practitioner Rural private day nursery – room leader Childminder
Third	End of the research	To review video footage of the case study children in their setting and explore practitioners' views on how play contributes to children's empowerment.	City centre private day nursery – room leader and 2 different key workers City centre Children's Centre – lead practitioner Rural private day nursery – room leader Childminder

The first two sets of interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes depending on the practitioners' responses to the questions. In their first interview some practitioners were able to link their understanding of empowerment to knowledge gained from studying for an early years foundation degree, and in the second interview all were able to talk at length about the personalities and play preferences of the case study children. The third interviews lasted longer, between 1 and 1 ½ hours as the practitioners reviewed between 4 and 5 video sequences of their case study child and were asked to comment on each one in relation to semi-structured questions based on the play behaviour of the child and how that may link to a process of empowerment (the video sequences used in the interviews are recorded in appendix F).

4.2.6 Parent interviews

The interviews with the seven parents of case study children took place in their home environments and were all conducted with the mothers of the case study children. The interviews ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in length depending on their responses. Some were more confident than others in engaging in a dialogue about the idea of empowerment, but all were able to give insights into their values and beliefs about bringing up their children, what they thought their child gained from playing with others and the differences between their child’s social and solitary play and how that impacted on the choices they made for their child’s social engagements and education. The second interview where mothers reviewed the video footage, gave them insight into their child’s activities in a different context and they were able to talk about comparisons between their child’s preferences and behaviour.

Figure 4.3: Interviews with parents

Interview	Timing in the research	Purpose of interview
First	Beginning of the research	To explore mothers’ views of empowerment for children, through thinking about their child’s character and preferences.
Second	End of the research	To review video footage of their child and discuss their views on their child’s experience of play and how this might link to empowerment.

4.2.7 Reflective diary

A handwritten reflective account was kept, detailing thoughts and observations about how children made their choices and decisions in the different play situations they encountered, how other children responded to those choices and notes on the different interactions children had with practitioners throughout the visit. For each entry, the date and location were noted. At one point in the research observations and interviews were

taking place in three different settings, involving five of the case study children, so the diary helped to clarify thoughts and record specific details which may have influenced the children's play or practitioners responses. The diary also assisted in formulating possible themes emerging from the collective play of the case study children across settings and contexts and helped to clarify my position as a researcher and to keep focused on the research question. The daily routine of the setting dictated opportunities for filming child-initiated, social play and at points during the research issues that were important to the practitioners, yet not directly concerned with the research overshadowed the filming and interviews. For example, one of the settings had just introduced a new way of recording child observations and practitioners were keen for opinions on its benefits. During the data collection period there was a need to balance the priorities of the research, whilst also assessing the potential observer influence in the settings.

#### *4.2.8 Documents from settings*

Documentary evidence was also used to gain further insight into each of the settings. All of the settings were using the 2008 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) practice guidance (DCSF, 2008) to plan and organise children's learning and development. Particular attention was paid to how the settings planned their curriculum and their interpretation of a play-based curriculum. The most recent Ofsted report was accessed for each setting alongside the learning journey accounts for each of the case study children. These documents provided a greater insight into the philosophy of each setting, their values and beliefs about play and how this translated into positive experiences for children.

### **4.3 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the data gathering methods of the research and the significance of the child at the centre of the research process. It has considered the use of video



recordings of children's play as non-participant observations and explored the practical issues of using video as a research method. It has examined the parent and practitioner interview process and the use of supplementary evidence to support the data collection. The data gathering methods were carefully chosen after the pilot study enabled different data gathering techniques to be evaluated. The predominant data for the main research was the collection of video footage which captured child-initiated play preferences. This data supported the aim of the research, ensuring children were at the centre of the research and the contexts where children play were represented.

The next chapter introduces the four different early years settings and the seven case study children and their family circumstances. Ethics are also examined and in particular ethical research with young children.

## **Chapter Five: Context of the research**

In this chapter the context of the research is explained and the case study children introduced, providing an insight into their daily routines and play preferences. The ethics throughout the research process are explored and analysed ensuring that the case study children's participation is supported and also safeguarded. Outlined below is the sample of case study children and settings selected for this research which the analysis, findings, discussion and conclusions are based upon. The early years settings and daily routine are described along with an insight into the family circumstances of the case study children who took part in the study.

### **5.1 The Sample**

The sample of early years settings and case study children selected for the research was based in one geographic location, in central England. The early years settings were selected in the first instance as it was important, given the theoretical underpinning of the sociocultural approach that a range of early years contexts, offering different play experiences to children were represented (Brooker, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). The range of the early years settings included different types of ownership, for example, private, for profit settings and a local authority resourced Children's Centre. This had a potential impact on how the settings were managed and their philosophy towards children's play (Brooker, 2011). There were four early years settings in total, two within the city centre, a Children's Centre and private day nursery and two on the outskirts, in more rural locations, a childminder and private day nursery.

From the children attending these settings, seven children were selected as the focus for the case studies. This selection was based on the children's age, an even mix between girls and boys, family situations for example proximity of extended family, siblings and nuclear family arrangements, regular attendance at the selected settings, and willingness of parents to be involved in the research. The selection criteria are discussed in more

detail later in this chapter in section 5.4.3 in considering the ethical implications of selecting case study children.

Initially, early years settings registered their interest in participating in the research after an outline of the study was given during a key note presentation at a conference in November 2010. The audience included early years setting owners/managers and practitioners studying for a foundation degree in Early Years with a University in central England. After the conference, those that had expressed interest were contacted and the details and timing of the pilot study and main research was discussed. The childminder and city centre private day nursery participated in both the pilot study and main research but the city centre Children's Centre and rural private day nursery showed interest in the study after a follow up presentation to foundation degree students at the same University in October 2011.

All of the settings were located within or in close proximity to a city in central England. The demographic of the city is a largely white population, with a range of socio-economic backgrounds and the case study children and families reflected these characteristics. The seven case study children were identified in liaison with the participating settings and their parents, and included children representative as far as possible of the diversity of the whole sample. Three of the children attended more than one setting and this provided insight into their play at different locations and with different children. This added value to the study in that the observational data recorded children's play preferences across different environments and situations.

#### *5.1.1 Age of the children*

The sample was a mixture of four boys and three girls. They had attended their respective settings for at least 12 months and were all four years old. Four year old

children were purposely chosen for the study and all were preparing to start school in September 2012. Through reflecting on the pilot study it became clear that older children may be better able to express themselves and engage in more detailed, imaginative play and social interaction (Smith et al., 2005). Four year old children in each of the pilot settings demonstrated their ability to express their opinion in play through different modes of communication, both verbal and non-verbal and use their imagination in play with each other. Fromberg and Bergen (2015) suggest that four year old children are at an interesting juncture in their lives as they are about to leave the familiarity of their early years setting, where they have formed strong relationships with practitioners and other children and are confident and self-assured in the routines and expectations of their surroundings. The children were aware of the impending transition to more formal learning in primary school through 'taster' sessions at their new school, meeting their new teacher and classmates. They were all aware of the imminent changes and to some extent this was reflected in their play. It was clear that practitioners and parents were acutely aware of how the transition to school may impact on their children's behaviour and expressed their anxiety through their interviews.

## **5.2 The settings**

### *5.2.1 City centre private day nursery*

The setting is a for profit small business with 89 places. Organised over two levels the pre-school room with a mixture of 3 ½ - 4 year old children is located on the first floor. There is access to an enclosed garden area, which is concrete paved with placed resources such as tractor tyres, climbing frame equipment and children's bicycles. The pre-school room is resourced with age appropriate toys and open-ended resources and children have the opportunity for child-led play and structured adult-led activities within the daily routine of the setting.

The owner of the setting has a degree in Early Childhood and the room leader is NVQ level 3 childcare qualified. The two key workers of the two focus children are NVQ level 2 and 3 qualified respectively. The setting takes advantage of staff development offered by the local authority and they actively encourage staff to study for a foundation degree in Early Childhood by part funding the qualification and offering study time during working hours.

The visits to the city centre private day nursery coincided with the case study children's attendance and mainly took place after lunch until home time. Once lunch had been cleared children had child-initiated play time for approximately an hour and a half. If the weather was good, then the children would have the opportunity to go outside, but this involved going down a set of stairs and along a corridor to the outside space and had to fit in with other age group rooms as there was not enough space for two groups of children to be outside at once. During the inside play time, children could access any of the resources, but sometimes had to negotiate for space on tables and also turn taking on the computer and indoor climbing frame structures. Towards the end of the afternoon, children were encouraged to tidy up and then have a snack, after which there was a story and then songs would be sung in anticipation for collection by parents and carers. A typical timetable of the children's afternoon activity was as follows:

- 1pm Lunch
- 2pm Child initiated play either inside or outside or a combination of both. If outside or a combination at least 15 minutes spent getting to and from the outside space (1 ½ hours)
- 3.30 Tidy up time where children are encouraged to put all the resources away
- 3.45 Snack time (including handwashing and toileting)
- 4.10 Story led by a practitioner
- 4.30 Home time

Two children, Max and Henry were the focus for the case studies in this setting. Henry also attended the Children's Centre.

#### *5.2.2 Rural private day nursery*

The nursery is a for profit small business with 52 places. Based within an old village primary school the setting is on one level and children in the pre-school room were all 4 years old. There are two outdoor areas, a large field with a constructed canopy for shelter and large outdoor adventure equipment comprising of a wooden bridge, platform and slide pole and a more conventional steel slide built into a bank. The other area is a more structured playground with a tarmac area for bicycles and a grass area where large tractor tyres have been stood on end and sunk into the ground, providing a climbing structure. The pre-school room is resourced with a variety of toys and materials for activities such as painting and model making and children have the opportunity for sustained child-initiated play outside, woven around indoor adult-directed activities in the daily routine.

The owner of the setting holds a degree in Early Childhood and Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) and the room leader is NVQ level 3 childcare qualified. There were another two members of staff in the pre-school room, both NVQ level 2 qualified. The setting takes advantage of any training and staff development offered by the local authority and regularly runs in-house staff development updates on policy and procedures.

The visits to the rural private day nursery mainly took place in the morning until lunchtime. Children had an hour of play where practitioners laid out resources for the children. There was some flexibility, in that if a child wanted to play with something else, they were allowed, but had to put away the item they had finished with first. A formal snack time followed and then outside play for an hour, regardless of the weather and usually in the field. The outside play was totally child-initiated and the large space encouraged physical

play. Lunch was served when all of the children were back inside. A typical timetable of the children's morning activity was as follows:

9am Child initiated play – as and when children arrive they join in play or choose their own resources to play with (1 hour)

10am Snack time (including handwashing and toileting)

11am Outside child-initiated play either in the field or playground (1 hour). At least 10 minutes spent on organising footwear and coats.

12pm Preparing for Lunch (handwashing, toileting, setting tables)

12.30 Lunch

Four children, Abigail, Lucy, Jessica and Matthew were the focus for the case studies in this setting. The twins, Jessica and Matthew also attended the childminder setting.

### *5.2.3 City centre Children's Centre*

The setting is a local authority owned Children's Centre which is open access to the local community. The centre provides a range of services for families with children under the age of five years and the focus of the study concentrated on the 'stay and play' sessions which were organised in the Forest School. A number of different children and their parents came each week to the outside space which consisted of a small woodland area. The practitioner had a theme each time; spending the first ten minutes around a central 'camp' area and then allowing the rest of the 2 hour session for child-initiated play. Parents mainly stayed around the 'camp' area for the duration of the session whilst the children played around them.

The lead practitioner at the Children's Centre has 30 years experience in childcare and management and is studying for a foundation degree in Early Childhood. The 'stay and

play' sessions required the parents to have overall responsibility for their children and therefore only one qualified practitioner was required.

The visits to the Children's Centre mainly took place in the morning. Parents and children would meet in the café and then make their way as a group to the Forest School. The first 10 minutes of the session were led by the early years practitioner who welcomed children and parents and introduced a theme such as the story of the 'Gruffalo' (The Gruffalo is a children's book about a mouse who takes a walk in the woods and comes across a bear like creature called the Gruffalo). Children were then free to explore and play in the woodland for the remaining two hours. They did not have to follow the theme introduced by the practitioner, but there were resources available which supported the theme which were kept in the central 'camp' area for that session. The early years practitioner was on hand to talk to parents and engaged with the children as and when they asked for help. At the end of the session children and parents shared lunch in the café. A typical timetable of the children's morning activities was as follows:

- 10am Parents and children meet in the café
- 10.15 Everyone walks together to the woodland area and meets in the camp area
- 10.20 Lead practitioner introduces the sessions focus
- 10.30 Child-initiated play in the woodland area (2 hours)
- 12.30 Session ends and parents and children have lunch together in the café

Two children, Ethan and Henry were the focus for the case studies in this setting. Henry also attended the city centre private day nursery.

#### *5.2.4 Childminder*

The setting is based in a home location and registered with the local authority for up to 6 children under the age of 8 years old. Children have access to three downstairs play rooms and an open plan kitchen area. Outside has a tarmac drive and large flat grass



area and inside, the home has a variety of toys and open-ended materials that children could play with. There is easy access between the house and garden and children were free to move between the two areas as they wished. The routine was unstructured and child-initiated, with assistance from an adult only being given when requested by a child.

The childminder is studying for a foundation degree in Early Childhood and has been a childminder for 5 years. She volunteers in a pre-school attached to the local primary school and is a member of the local childminding network group. She takes advantage of any training and staff development offered to childminders by the local authority.

The visits to the childminder took place in the afternoon. Children had been provided with lunch before coming to the setting and so were straight away accessing resources to play with. The afternoon was unstructured with the childminder checking that the children were safe and answering any questions they had. The childminder was mainly located in the kitchen where she could see both the garden and play rooms if different children were in different spaces and snacks and drinks were provided as and when children requested them. There was a mix of ages at the childminder setting; the older children supported the younger ones who wanted to be involved in the same things such as making a necklace with beads. Play continued until parents left with their children. There was a length of time where parents chatted to the childminder and had coffee and snacks before leaving the setting. A typical timetable of the children's afternoon activities was as follows:

- 1pm Children arrive and offered a drink and some discussion of what they want to play with
- 1.15 Children access resources and child-initiated play (2 hours)
- 3.15 Children offered a snack and drink
- 3.30 Parents start arriving to pick up children

Two children, the twins, Jessica and Matthew were the focus for the case studies in the setting. They also attended the rural private day nursery.

The grid below details the different settings and the children that attended them:

Figure 5.1: Matrix of settings attended by the case study children

Child	Age at the time of the research	City centre private day nursery	Rural private day nursery	City centre Children's Centre	Childminder
Max	4 years 7 months	X			
Henry	4 years 4 months	X		X	
Abigail	4 years 5 months		X		
Lucy	4 years 4 months		X		
Jessica	4 years 6 months		X		X
Matthew	4 years 6 months		X		X
Ethan	4 years 7 months			X	

### **5.3 Case study children**

In this section the case study children are introduced with information about their family and childcare situation gained from the parents in their first interview.

#### *5.3.1 Ethan*

Ethan lives on the outskirts of the city with his mother and father and new born baby sister. He has extended family close by and the family has a dog. Ethan attends the Children's Centre twice a week and is looked after at home the rest of the time. Ethan looks older than his 4 years and is the tallest child at the Children's Centre.

#### *5.3.2 Henry*

Henry lives in the city centre with his mother and father. He is 'a long awaited' only child (as described by his mother). The family is not originally from the area and there are no extended family members close by. Henry attends the Children's Centre twice a week and the city centre private day nursery for two days per week.

#### *5.3.3 Max*

Max lives in the city centre with his mother and father. He has a younger sister and extended family members close by. He attends the private day nursery three days per week and is at home for the remainder of the time.

#### *5.3.4 Matthew and Jessica*

Matthew and Jessica are twins. They live outside of the city in a rural hamlet with their mother and father. Their father works away from home for sustained periods of time. They have extended family approximately an hour's drive away and visit them some weekends and holidays. Matthew and Jessica have an older sister and a grown up half brother and sister who do not live with them, but are visited on a regular basis. Matthew

and Jessica attend the rural private day nursery five mornings per week and a childminder five afternoons per week.

#### *5.3.5 Lucy*

Lucy lives outside of the city centre in a rural village with her mother and father. Her father is in the military and works away from home for sustained periods of time. She has a younger sister and extended family who she visits on a regular basis. She attends the rural private day nursery five days per week.

#### *5.3.6 Abigail*

Abigail lives outside of the city in a rural village with her mother. She is an only child with no extended family members close by and limited contact with her father. She attends the rural private day nursery five days per week and has done so since she was six months old.

In the next section, the different considerations for the ethics in the research are examined. They form an integral part to the study and provided a structure which ensured that protocols were formally considered and adhered to and that all participants were aware of the purpose and intended use of the collected data.

### **5.4 Ethics**

Approval of favourable opinion for the study's ethics protocol was given by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee before the research was undertaken (see appendix A). In addition, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) revised guidelines (2011) were adhered to. There were three areas of consideration in relation to ethics in the planning and design of the research:

- the cooperation and consent of the early years setting for filming and interviews to take place in their establishment;
- the involvement of individual early years practitioners and parents of the case study children in participating in a series of interviews;
- the children's assent to be filmed during child-initiated, social play situations in their setting and playing at home and to talk about their favourite play aided by the use of photographs from the video footage taken during the research.

#### *5.4.1 Cooperation and consent of early years settings*

The four early years settings taking part in the study all had members of staff who had completed or who were studying for a foundation degree in Early Years with a University in central England. I had links with this University as a former academic in the Early Childhood department, but did not know any of the settings, their owners/managers, practitioners, parents or children prior to the start of the research.

In the first instance an initial meeting was set up with the owner or manager of the setting to discuss the purpose of the research and the implications for the setting and early years practitioners. An open, but professional relationship was established as it was important to discuss the logistics of filming in a small space. The meetings also considered how children would react, how the presence of a relative stranger would impact on the children and practitioners and how the research may add to the workload for practitioners in accommodating another person in their room. It was also important to explore the potential implications of the findings of the research and how they may impact on the settings' thinking and practice.

All of the settings were accommodating in terms of face to face meetings and generous with their time. A number of meetings were arranged before the research commenced to

ensure everything was in place and that everyone involved felt informed, included and that their opinion was valued. This was a central aspect of the research as it was important that each stakeholder in each setting felt part of the process. It was hoped that just as the study was researching children's empowerment, each participant would also have a sense of empowerment in being involved in this important work. The open dialogue created between the setting, practitioners and myself as the researcher, supported numerous visits prior, during and after the research had been conducted and a professional relationship with all of the settings and practitioners continues.

#### *5.4.2 Informed consent - Early years practitioners*

During the initial contact period, there were opportunities to talk to staff about their practice, their views on play and how the research aligned with their own values and beliefs. It also provided opportunities to get to know the daily routine of the children and setting, understand the patterns of attendance for individual children and develop professional and trusting relationships with the staff so that they felt comfortable in asking questions and not feeling as if the research would make a judgement about their role or responsibilities.

After a four week period, staff that were going to be directly involved in the research, undertaking interviews in their role as room leaders or key workers of the case study children were asked to sign a consent form, whilst the setting manager/owner was also asked to sign consent to their setting's participation. They were made aware that their comments during interview and the video footage of the children and setting would be used for educational and research purposes, but their identity would remain anonymous.

Goodenough et al., (2004) warns that individuals may be initially enthusiastic to take part because of an interest in the topic or because they don't want to appear uncooperative,

but that it is important to allow a 'cooling off' period for participants to change their mind. The settings and practitioners were made aware that they could walk away from participating at any time during the research although the work that was done to establish relationships and to discuss every aspect of the research ensured that this did not happen.

#### *5.4.3 Selecting the case study children and approaching the parents*

All parents of children attending the settings were made aware of the research through an information letter which was displayed in a prominent position within the setting. Parents of children in the specific rooms where the video footage would take place were given an information leaflet to take home and visits by the researcher prior to the commencement of the research coincided with drop-off and pick-up times so that parents had the opportunity to meet and ask questions about the research. Alderson (2004) reflects on the challenge of balancing the need to provide easily accessible information whilst not overwhelming parents with too much information. Overall, parents were very positive about the research and did not raise any concerns. In two of the settings, video recording of activities was a common occurrence and parents and practitioners were happy for filming to take place within the same guidelines. Copies of information letters for participants and consent forms can be found in appendix B.

The case study children were chosen in discussion with the owner/managers of the setting and the early years practitioners. The criteria for approaching a parent of a child to take part as a case study child were:

- Aged 4 years old and attending school in the September of that year;
- As far as possible an even number between girls and boys in the research;
- A range of family situations represented in terms of extended family, number of siblings and nuclear family arrangements;

- Regular attendance at the individual settings;
- Parent's willingness to take part in interviews and accommodate a home visit.

Not as many children fitted the criteria as originally thought and for some parents the timing of the research (Summer, 2012) meant they were not able to participate as it coincided with holiday plans. The early years practitioners and settings were instrumental in approaching parents and gauging their interest in the first instance before being introduced to me. It was at this point in the research that it became clear that some of the children suggested for the research attended more than one setting that had already agreed to be part of the study. This provided an opportunity to follow three of the children in two different settings as well as their home environment.

I was able to meet the case study children's parents in the two weeks prior to the commencement of the research in the early years settings to answer any questions they had. All of the parents of the case study children showed an interest in the subject area and willingly signed the consent forms. We exchanged telephone and email details and met each other briefly at either the beginning or end of a filming session when they dropped off or collected their child. I was also in contact with them to arrange the home visits and their interviews and so a consistent dialogue was in place during the period of the research. This enabled professional relationships to be established which supported the interview process. It was important that face to face contact with parents and practitioners was established before the research commenced so that they fully understood the implications of having a video camera in the setting and in their home, the time commitment of the interviews and the purpose of the research. Although the information leaflet provided for settings and parents was important, Wiles et al., (2004) argues that often they are not read or thoroughly understood and so it was essential that I was available to parents and practitioners to answer any questions, either by being present at the setting or via telephone or email.



#### *5.4.4 Opt in/out*

For the parents of non-case study children attending the settings, an 'opt out' or passive consent policy was adopted. If a parent or guardian had concerns they could specifically ask for their child not to be filmed, however no concerns by parents were raised before, during or after filming. Vellinga et al., (2011, p2) considers that active consent or 'opt in' can limit participation when large numbers of participants are involved because of the administration and collection of signed consent forms required. They argue that 'if consent is considered an indication of willingness rather than refusal and if risks for the participants are low, an 'opt out' arrangement is generally the most effective procedure without violating the option of providing choice'. For parents of the case study children an 'opt in' consent policy was appropriate as their children were the focus of the study and the filming and their specific consent was necessary. The case study children would also be filmed during a home visit and parents interviewed and so this also required them to 'opt in' to the research.

#### *5.4.5 Child participants*

At the first meeting with children in each of the settings, practitioners facilitated circle time where the video camera was introduced to all of the children in the room and the research explained in child friendly terms. The children were interested in the camera and wanted to hold it, but they were not overly impressed as they were familiar with a variety of technology. They were more interested in why I wanted to film them and when I was going to come and visit. Although the case study children had been chosen at this point, they were not singled out in the group of children as all of them were going to be filmed. Noyes (2008) states the importance of children understanding the nature of research and how they contribute. In the explanation to children, the idea of having their play filmed seemed to be accepted and they were happy to tell me during circle time what they liked to play with. However the notion of empowerment was not entered into with the children as this was deemed quite a complex process and inappropriate at the time.

During the circle time sessions in each of the settings children verbally agreed to being filmed. The children were aged between 3 ½ and 4 years across the four settings and because of their age, children's assent was gained rather than their full informed consent (Hill, 2005). Lindsay (2000) states that seeking informed consent from children is always questionable as it is difficult to know if children understand the context in which the research will be presented or the implications for them at a later date. However I was present on several visits to the settings in the four weeks before the filming started and each time the camera was visible and accessible for children to handle although no actual filming took place.

The case study children were individually asked if it was 'ok' for them to be filmed and all gave their verbal consent. Once the filming of the children in the different contexts had been completed, still photographs of the children playing in different situations were shown to the children. They were asked which pictures they liked and why. Smiley and sad face stickers were used to gauge children's preferences of their play and their opinions contributed to support the overall research of empowerment in play. Talking with the case study children took place in the setting or home after all of the filming had been completed and practitioners or parents were close by to act as a gatekeeper if the child wanted to withdraw from talking to me. It was important that children's views were represented in the research and the research was mindful of children's rights to express their views and be heard in matters which affect them (UNCRC, article 12, 1989).

#### *5.4.6 Gatekeepers*

The early years practitioners in each of the participating settings acted as gatekeepers for the children's participation in filming. In research with children, Alderson and Morrow (2004) consider gatekeepers as a way in which safeguards can be put in place to ensure children have a choice about participating. Practitioners were present at all times during

filming and the video captured naturally occurring child-initiated, social play in their daily routine. Alderson (2004) warns that children may find it difficult to tell an adult that they no longer want to participate because the relationship between the researcher and child is not well established. Therefore, children were made aware that they could go to a practitioner if they felt unsure of being filmed, just as they would go to practitioner in all other aspects of their daily routine.

The research brought a relative stranger into the children's setting with a video camera. In general children were not particularly bothered by the video camera, sometimes asking to be filmed and other times deliberately moving away from where the camera was. Langston et al., (2004) consider that researchers, especially collecting data over a period of time or a number of visits need to be vigilant to children's unspoken expression or reluctance to participate. The early years practitioners had a responsibility to the children's well-being and as such were in a position to monitor children's behaviour whilst being filmed and also safeguard against any negative behaviour towards other children in line with their setting's policy. The practitioners were also attuned to children's individual responses to the video camera being present and were therefore able to support them in participating or withdrawing from the research.

#### *5.4.7 Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity*

Participants' data from the early years practitioner and parent interviews was assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and all computer data records use the same pseudonyms. All interview transcripts were made anonymous to ensure participants' identities were not revealed. Computer data and video footage was held securely with restricted access via a user name and password. The data management complies with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Case study children's parents and the settings agreed that video extracts may be used in conference presentations and dissemination of the research. Where other children appear in the video footage, specific consent will be sought from the parents for the individual presentations of the video footage. If necessary, images will be obscured to protect participant identity.

The video content in each of the four settings was made available to the individual settings, the parents of the case study children and the children to review. Each setting received two copies of the completed video footage of their setting on DVD, whilst case study children's parents received a copy of the video footage containing their child. The footage also formed part of the interview process for both the practitioners and parents, used for video stimulated review (Forman, 1999).

The video aspect of the research acted as non-participant observations and captured the naturally occurring instances of child-initiated social play in different play situations. As the researcher, I was not counted in the legislative requirement for child/adult ratios and there was an agreed protocol between myself and practitioners in each of the settings that the filming would not (as far as possible) engage with children's play or indeed in any conflict that arose amongst children. In each of the settings, the play space was within a defined area and practitioners acted as gatekeepers if a case study child wanted to withdraw from being filmed. If any child was in danger or conflict arose, the practitioners acted in accordance with the setting's policies regardless of the filming. At the end of each filming session the researcher, practitioners and manager/owner discussed any incidental event that happened during the session and the potential reasons for the play behaviour. All of the practitioners and managers at the settings expressed interest in taking part in debriefing sessions and on-going conversations about children's play and empowerment. Their commitment, time and willingness to accommodate the research have resulted in an open dialogue about children's play and individual setting practices.

## **5.5 Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the context of the research and the case study children with an insight into their daily routines and play preferences. Seven case study children attending a total of four different early years settings were selected with three of those seven children attending multiple settings. It was important that the settings were willing to support the research taking place as it required a time and organisational commitment from them in facilitating the collection of observational video data as outlined in the previous chapter. The children and parents involved in the research also committed to interviews and a home visit where their children's play was recorded. This meant that the ethics in the research process had to be carefully considered and settings, practitioners, children and parents supported through the safeguards put in place. One of the key elements as part of the ethics was to have open discussions with anyone interested in the study before the research took place. This assisted in the children and adults willingness to take part. It was also important that practitioners understood their role as gatekeepers and that all children were aware of their options for participation and non-participation throughout the video data collection process.

In the next chapter the way in which the data gathered from the video observations and interviews from practitioners and parents has been analysed is examined including systematically coding the video data and interviews. The analysis of the data contributes to the emerging themes from the research, children's Participation, Voice and Ownership.

## **Chapter Six: Analysis**

In this chapter thematic analysis applied to the research data is examined through organising and systemising the intricacies of the video and interview data. The analysis began by looking at the video data and coding children's actions and interactions in child-initiated, social play. The semi-structured interviews were also coded in relation to parents' and practitioners' opinions about children's preferences, play behaviour and their understanding of empowerment. There were three stages to the analysis of the data collected in the study:

- the organisation of data through coding;
- content analysis of the codes;
- thematic development through interpreting the content analysis.

The aim of the analysis was to develop valid and repeatable interpretations of the research data capable of being generalised for future research.

The focus on the seven case study children's play in different contexts generated the video data, but alongside the footage, perspectives from parents and early years practitioners who worked with the children on a daily basis were also captured through a series of semi-structured interviews. The video and interview data were considered under three main areas:

- children's choices and their decisions;
- the context of children's play in respect of the environment and resources;
- interactions between children.

These three areas were decided upon from the analysis of literature surrounding children's play and the concept of empowerment outlined in chapter 2.1 and 2.5. In the video data, the codes looked for instances of children's actions and interactions in their play behaviour, but in the interview data the codes captured parents and practitioners

opinions about children's play in relation to their choices and decisions, the context they played in and the influence of other children. The interviews also asked direct questions of parents and practitioners about their understanding of children's empowerment which generally informed the conclusions of the research.

Practitioners and parents also had the opportunity to consider a cross section of video stimulated reviews of their children's play. Their comments about the video footage were coded and subject to content analysis. These were cross referenced with the content analysis of the video data to look for patterns in the codes. The spreadsheet in appendix F shows the specific video sequences that parents and practitioners offered their views and perspectives on during the interviews.

### **6.1 Coding Video Data**

Traditionally coding categories are perceived as seeking objectivity recording as far as possible a neutral view of behaviour or actions (Slater, 1998). However, Hammersley (1998) argues that in an ethnographic study objectivity is always compromised, not only by the preconceived views or ideology that the researcher brings but also by the research questions being asked. Mason (2002) considers the ethnographic researcher as a 'knower' bringing their own knowledge and understanding of what they want to research. But developing codes relating to theoretical concerns so that codes and categories were clear in their meaning supported the content analysis within a qualitative and interpretative research paradigm (Lutz and Collins, 1993).

The codes were developed through analysing the literature surrounding the term empowerment and how this is interpreted and applied in other professional contexts. These were considered alongside existing research into the significant factors influencing children's play (see chapter 2). Bringing together the literature on empowerment and on

play informed and clarified the development of the operational codes that were eventually used for the analysis. These were then organised into three areas, (children's choices and decisions, the context of children's play and interactions between children). These areas were intended to reflect what are generally seen as the main influences on child-initiated play.

The codes are open to interpretation and some may appear to practitioners to overlap depending on their professional background and perspectives. However the codes within the study can be characterised as enlightening (Slater, 1998, p236) because they produced 'a breakdown... that will be analytically interesting and coherent'. The codes applied to the video data and interview transcripts are not dependent on a pre-existing frame or model, but derived from an analysis of the literature surrounding children's play choices and motivation. Each individual code is a contemporary area of early years research in its own right, for example specific research into children's risk taking attracts international funding (Sandseter, 2013). The operational definition of codes in this study draws on existing literature and current research, but the codes are unique in looking at children's play for behaviour specifically associated with empowerment. A ten percent sample of the video data, representative across the seven case study children were subjected to reliability testing (see section 6.4 later in this chapter) to check the understanding of the codes was accessible by other early years professionals. In the following sections the video data codes and interview codes are organised into the three areas of choices and decisions, contexts, and interactions between children, along with their operational definition.

#### *6.1.1 Children's choices and decisions*

The video data captured child-initiated, social play where children engaged in a range of different play opportunities. In every play interaction, children were making choices and



decisions about what they wanted to do and how long they wanted to do it for. The children made decisions about how they were going to act and react to other children around them. The codes in this area differentiate the choices and decisions children made although there is potential for codes to overlap and to be connected, for example it could be argued that children need determination and persistence in order to meet challenges. The relationship between the codes in children's play are considered further in this chapter in section 6.5.1.

Figure 6.1: Children’s choices and decisions, codes and explanation (video data)

Children’s choices and decisions	
Code	Operational definition of codes
Risk taking	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>In their play behaviour children actively search for thrills and excitement to push the boundaries of the physical limits set by the setting. Children may be hesitant or look for reassurance from others while involved in risk taking or before engaging in the play.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Ball et al., (2008) consider that children have an active appetite for risk and will seek out ways in which they can push their boundaries and capabilities. This may happen in a variety of different play situations and involve different play types such as play with objects (Smith, 2005). In Hughes (2006) and the taxonomy of play, risky play may have elements of different types of play such as exploratory play (exploration of the unknown and of new and different ways of playing), locomotor play (intense movement and physically active play), mastery play (testing and challenging own physical abilities and mastery of the environment) as well as the more common play types associated with risk such as rough and tumble play.</p>

Challenge	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>In their play children challenge themselves but do not recognise or realise that they are taking risks. They may be engrossed in play that an adult may perceive as being risky, but are oblivious to any perceived danger and children are only concerned with the continuation of the play.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Readdick and Park (1998) consider that children in general are explorative and seek out ways in which they can challenge themselves. The physical and social situation that they find themselves in may determine whether their play behaviour is perceived as a risk or a challenge. A situation where children display positive emotions such as a 'have a go' attitude may influence how children approach certain play situations and consequently whether they are challenging themselves or taking a risk.</p>
Persistence	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Children are engaged in something for the sake of doing it, stimulated by their own interest. They are involved in continuous, extended engagement where they are motivated to take part or explore their own abilities or emotions without</p>

Persistence	<p>being prompted by someone else to do so. Children seek out opportunities to pursue their individual interests regardless of what other children are doing.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Hughes (2001) refers to elements of the code 'persistence' as intrinsic motivation where a child is compelled to play and they make choices and decisions over how they play and what they play with.</p>
Determination	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Children doing something within their play to achieve an end result even if this means overcoming barriers, making mistakes or failing at their attempts. The motivation for the play is to achieve their end goal which is set by them and no one else.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>The goal to achieve an outcome is set and regulated by the child or children playing but the idea may have been initiated by an earlier experience or by an adult previous to the play taking place. The play has a direction and a purpose which is usually shared by the majority of the children involved.</p>

Initiative	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Children become actively engaged in doing something different from the rest of the group.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>They may break away from other children to pursue their own play or may take a small number of children with them capturing their imagination with the idea. They may also initiate change within the whole group, taking the play in a new direction based on the original idea or initiate a completely new idea that other children want to be a part of. The child, regardless of what other children think or do, continues with their ideas for a sustained period.</p>
Knowledge	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Children demonstrate knowledge of what they are doing through their language or actions.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>A child may have more knowledge than another child in a play situation and may demonstrate their knowledge through physical actions indicating implicit knowledge in what they are doing or through verbal communication or instruction, demonstrating explicit knowledge and understanding.</p>

Following	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>In their play children are content to follow another child and model what they are doing.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Following relates to not only modelling the same physical actions that other children demonstrate, but also to the emotional responses that a child may show in their play, for example, excitement or empathy.</p>
Sharing	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Children share physical resources with each other.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>When a child is willing to share their play resources with another child, they are drawing on their knowledge and understanding of the social or cultural rules and etiquette that they have learned from their parents and through participating in a community of social interactions.</p>
Attracting attention	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>A deliberate act through physical action or verbal communication to attract the attention of another child, group of children or adult.</p>

Attracting attention	<p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>The act of attracting attention may not always work to the advantage of the child as other children in the situation have a choice whether to listen or react to the child attracting attention, or to ignore them. If a child attracts the attention of an adult, this can also have implications for the child and the nature of the play as the child cannot assume the response of the adult will be the one they want. Consequently attracting attention can be a risk for the child as they are unable to predict the responses of others.</p>
Involving an adult	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>A conscious attempt by a child or group of children to involve an adult in their play.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>It is the child's decision and choice to involve the adult in what they are doing. This may be an invitation to join the play, to settle a dispute or to ask for help.</p>

### *6.1.2 The context of children's play*

The context of children's play is significant in the research as it involves different types of early years settings, the home environment of the case study children and includes indoors and outside spaces. The role of the adult as a practitioner or parent was not included in the coding of the context of children's play because all of the data centred on child-child interactions. In some of the video sequences children attempted to involve an adult in their play, but that has been coded under children's choices and decisions (see figure 6.1) because children were in control of what they did and who they wanted to involve in their play.



Figure 6.2: Context of children’s play, codes and explanation (video data)

Context	
Code	Operational definition of codes
Flexible environment	<u>Definition</u> How a child or group of children occupy their play space, using it in a way that it might not have been intended.
	<u>Explanation</u> Children’s play is influenced by their environment through what they can and cannot do in the space. Some of what children do in their play environment is linked to the social and cultural norms that they associate with the space, for example children usually occupy the role play area in the way it has been intended i.e. as a shop or hairdresser. When children engage with a flexible environment they use the space in a more resourceful and imaginative way so that play is not constrained by the environment (Brown, 2003).
Flexible resources	<u>Definition</u> The resources children play with are used in different and sometimes unexpected ways, offering multiple possibilities for their play.
	<u>Explanation</u>

Flexible resources	Children use the resources available to them to support their play ideas, imagination and creativity. They create rules about what resources can be and sustain those rules throughout their play. For example, a stick might become a sword or a wheel from a toy car, a pretend biscuit. Flexible resources relates to the variables children use the resources for to extend the possibilities of inventiveness, creativity and discovery (Nicholson, 1971).
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### *6.1.3 Interactions between the children*

These codes relate to the different interactions children initiated between themselves in social play situations. In some of the video sequences, children engaged with either practitioners or parents and these interactions were coded only when the child initiated the interaction or conversation with the adult. They were coded in the same way as child-child interactions, but were differentiated in the content analysis with an (A) suffix.

Figure 6.3: Connection between children, codes and explanation (video data)

Interactions between children	
Code	Operational definition of codes
Negotiation	<u>Definition</u> Discussion between two or more children where opinions are given and compromises are made to reach a point where play continues or changes.
	<u>Explanation</u> Children are clear in what they want and try to persuade other children that their idea or way of doing something will be successful. They put their point of view across verbally or through showing other children their idea with the resources available to them.
Instruction	<u>Definition</u> A child telling another child or group of children what to do or how to do it.
	<u>Explanation</u> This includes children informing other children of the 'rules' of the game and what they can and cannot do in the play space. The rules may be an iteration of what an adult has previously said or it may be something that the children have

Instruction	devised themselves. Children may invent rules to gain power over other children, convincing them that their way of doing something is correct.
Non -verbal cues	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>The body language children use to convey messages to other children.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Consideration is given to gestures children make, movement around the play space, distance between children and how they use their physicality to influence other children.</p>
Supporting role	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Where a child shows either physical or verbal support of another child in a play situation.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Children often move in and out of a supporting role, helping another child to do something physical or join in for a few moments and then move away from the situation. A supporting role considers children's ability to be empathetic, seeing that another child is in need and responding in a way that they think will help the situation.</p>
Verbal communication	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>Where a child uses their voice to convey a message to other children.</p>

Verbal communication	<p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>This code is not exclusive to children's use of language, or who can shout the loudest, but about the subtle ways in which children use their voice to attract attention from other children, support their peers or change the play situation. Children use their verbal communication in sometimes very deliberate ways with purpose to achieve an end, but in other situations the impact of children's verbal communication can be unexpected to the child who initiated the exchange. It is interesting then to see how the verbal communication influences other children, how they respond and how the child who initiated the communication manages the situation.</p>
Listening	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>When a child listens to other children and makes decisions based on what they have said.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>For a child to listen to another child during play is a skill in itself. It demonstrates that the listening child has respect for what the other has to say, is engaged and wants to be a part of what is going on and is willing to take on board the thoughts and ideas of another child.</p>

Interest	<p><u>Definition</u></p> <p>A child showing interest in what is happening and wants to be part of it by engaging with other children involved in the same play.</p> <p><u>Explanation</u></p> <p>Children show their interest in other children's actions and play through their desire to be part of the play or game, their excitement through their body language or verbal communication. Interest can also be shown through modelling the same play in an attempt to join in with established play or through gesture which suggests to other children that they would like to participate.</p>
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## **6.2 Using computer software**

The video data were coded using the computer software 'Atlas ti'. It enabled the two minute time sampled video sequences to be marked up using the codes outlined above. It also enabled the same video sequence to be coded more than once, so for example the same sequence of a video clip could be coded as 'challenge' as well as 'determination'. With the software it was then possible to see all of the video sequences coded, for example, 'instruction' to compare the context and frequency to which the code applied to each of the individual case study children. Each coded section of a video sequence was marked with a time code so it was possible to revisit the coded sections.

The interview transcripts from the parents and practitioners were also coded using 'Atlas ti'. The software enabled the transcripts to be coded in the same way as the video data so quotes from parents and practitioners could be grouped together under the same code.

## **6.3 Coding of parent and practitioner interviews**

The interview codes supported the video data codes in building an overall picture of children's empowerment in play and direct quotes from the transcripts were coded under four areas of:

- opinions about empowerment;
- opinions about children's play in relation to their choices and decisions;
- the influence of the context of play;
- the influence of other children.

The codes for the parent and practitioner interviews captured personal thoughts and feelings, drawing on their professional experiences and relating their knowledge of the case study children to the wider idea of empowerment and what that might mean for children. Parents and practitioners also had the opportunity to review video sequences from the research and



comment on what they felt the children were doing, expressing and feeling whilst they were playing. Their insights to the idea of children’s empowerment in play added an important dimension to the research.

6.3.1 *Opinions about empowerment*

Parents and practitioners were asked to think about the term empowerment and what empowerment might be for children through a series of interviews (see chapter 4.2.5 and 4.2.6). They were also asked to think about how they could facilitate children’s empowerment and what that might mean in terms of how they supported children at home (parents) and in a setting (practitioners).

Figure 6.4: Parent and practitioner opinions about empowerment, codes and explanation (interview data)

Code	Definition
Children’s behaviour	Where parents and practitioners commented on any aspect of children’s behaviour and linked this to ideas of empowerment.
Environment	Where parents and practitioners commented upon the environment supporting empowerment or empowering experiences.
Descriptors of empowerment	Words or examples which were offered during all of the interviews to describe empowerment.

6.3.2 *Opinions about children’s choices and decisions*

Parents and practitioners were asked to comment on children’s play preferences, their likes and dislikes to give insight into children’s personalities and the choices and decisions they were most likely to make.

Figure 6.5: Parent and practitioner opinions about children’s choices/decisions, codes and explanation (interview data)

Code	Definition
Reflection of interests	Any examples from all of the interviews where empowerment was linked to children’s interests and preferences.
Experiences	Thoughts and reflections from parents and practitioners where they considered children’s experiences had a direct or indirect influence on the choices and decisions they made during play.
Influence of family situation	Connections parents and practitioners made between children’s play choices and decisions which reflected family situations, issues or concerns.

### 6.3.3 The influence of the context of play

The play context was significant to the research to the extent in which children acted and reacted in certain situations. Their reactions may have been in response to the play context, or they may have been a natural reaction based on their preferences. The parents and practitioners were able to give insight into the case study children’s responses to different contexts of play and comment on whether their play behaviour was a natural disposition or revealed something unexpected. They were then able to comment on whether they considered this to be because of the play context or additional factors.

Figure 6.6: Parent and practitioner opinions about the influence of the context of play, codes and explanations (interview data)

Code	Definition
Involvement	Comments from parents and practitioners about children’s involvement in their play and how they felt the context of the play influenced their participation and concentration.
Learning opportunities	Responses from parents and practitioners where they felt the play children were involved in created or provided learning opportunities and whether children were benefiting from these.
Resources	Where parents or practitioners felt that the resources in the play space influenced how children played, the length of time they played and how resources influenced their engagement with other children.

6.3.4 *The influence of other children on the case study children*

The choices children make are influenced by the interactions they have with other children within the boundaries of the environment they are situated in. There can be tension between children as they attempt to establish themselves within a group or individual children can experience dilemmas and struggles in trying to establish themselves. The people who knew the case study children the best – parents and key practitioners were able to comment on the strategies children used to negotiate their way into social play situations.

Figure 6.7: Parent and practitioner opinions about the influence of other children on the case study children, codes and explanations (interview data)

Code	Definition
Group dynamics	Parents and practitioners were able to comment on children’s positioning within play, for example if they felt the child was in a leadership or following role, how assertive they were being, how confident they appeared and their capacity to cooperate with their peers.
Social understanding	Through the interviews parents and practitioners commented upon how children responded in different situations and their capacity for social skills such as reading other children’s behaviours, reacting accordingly and showing empathy.
Communication	Comments from parents and practitioners on the communication between children and how that influenced their play.

### 6.4 Reliability

Establishing the reliability of the operational codes was important to the study because these could be open to interpretation (Slater, 1998). In adopting an interpretive approach in the research it was necessary to ensure that, although actions of children could be interpreted according to different perspectives, it was possible to arrive at a shared understanding of the definitions and explanations of the codes. Accordingly, an academic reviewer was used to check the objectivity of my own interpretation of the codes and how they were applied in viewing the video sequences. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) recognise that subjectivity can mean that because the data generated captures only a moment in time, that particular combination of variables in children’s choices, context and interactions with other children

may not happen in exactly the same way again. By introducing another academic to view the video sequences I could have greater confidence in my interpretation of the video against the operational codes.

The reviewer was selected based on an academic background in Early Childhood, with experience in supporting children's play in a variety of contexts and a proven track record of play based publications. The reviewer selected had a professional background working with pre-school community projects and had published in peer reviewed Early Childhood journals. They were asked to independently code three video sequences from each of the seven case study children using the operational definitions and explanations. This was to ensure that firstly, the codes were clear and easy to follow, that the three areas (choices, context and interactions) were definable and the codes clearly related to these areas. In applying the codes to the video sequences, the reviewer confirmed that my own subjectivity and interpretation of children's play behaviour was consistent and recognisable to another professional. In total a ten percent sample amounting to 21 video sequences, 3 per case study child, out of a total of 210 was reviewed. The video sequences represented the children in a range of contexts including a home environment, but apart from making sure each child's home context was included in the sample the other sequences were randomly selected from the different settings the children attended, (see appendix E for a table of the video sequences scrutinised by the academic reviewer).

The academic was not prompted in any way prior to seeing the video sequences other than knowing the overarching research questions and being familiar with literature and current research on children's play. The sequences viewed were organised by the child rather than the context or setting and the academic was asked to code the sequences using the computer software 'Atlas ti' in the same way that all of the data had been coded. When it

emerged that the academic was making very similar coding decisions (there were slight timing variations on some of the codes), she was asked to review through the computer software all of the sequences for one code and to decide on which code they related to. Her decisions were concurrent with the interpretations already made about the video footage and therefore the outcome from the reliability test was very encouraging in supporting the validity of the codes across the research and gave confidence for the reliability of the data decisions being made.

## **6.5 Content analysis**

The content analysis applied to the codes provided a tangible starting point to organise the visual data and to begin to look for trends of reoccurring instances that could contribute to establishing themes. A graph produced from the content analysis of the coding provides a visual representation of the data showing dominant codes across the video data (see appendix D). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that determining what can be considered a theme can be linked to the number of occurrences of particular codes but that it is also important to consider the different contexts in which the code appears. A higher frequency of occurrence for a particular code does not necessarily mean that it is more important than another code in interpreting the data. It is the judgement and interpretation of the researcher to decide upon the dominant themes whilst recognising the implications for the decisions made within an ethnographic and qualitative study.

### ***6.5.1 Relationships between the codes***

It was anticipated that there would be a relationship between codes, for example when 'challenge' was coded it was thought that 'determination' or 'persistence' would also be evident. However this was not always the case consistently across the coding process. In a

minority of cases, codes were closely associated to similar contexts such as outdoor play, but not to a significant extent to assume a relationship across the data. It is a concern that when making the codes more widely available to early years practitioners in the future one may interpret play and code it as 'initiative' where another may interpret the same play and code it 'risk taking'. There may also be interpretation in relation to gender where preconceptions about girls and boys play are coded accordingly. The codes will always be open to interpretation, especially those related to children's choices and decisions because it is hard to know exactly why those choices were made by the children unless they are able to articulate their decisions. The relationship between the codes if made available for use in everyday practice may also be different depending on individual settings and their philosophy towards children's play.

## **6.6 Themes**

From the content analysis of the video data and interview transcriptions the study looked for themes, described by Boyatzis (1998) as underlying ideas and patterns. In the next chapter the three overarching super-themes of the research will be introduced, Participation, Voice and Ownership and the five sub-themes, Motivation, Cooperation, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy are also explained. The themes in this research have an analytic purpose in examining the extent to which empowerment features in child-initiated, social play, but are based on assumptions which require interpretation of the content analysis.

After a presentation of the research at a European Early Childhood conference (Canning, 2014) there was an opportunity to meet with academics from different countries with related interests. The relationship between the operational codes, sub-themes and super-themes were discussed and analysed in relation to the interpretive nature of the themes and some of the challenges that the research may encounter because of the subjectivity in interpreting the

findings. The cultural context of the data was considered and discussed in relation to understanding the significance of children's play and if the super-themes could be identified in their everyday experiences of observing children's play (see chapter 8.6.1 for further analysis of the group discussion). Bernard and Ryan (2010) states that thematic analysis is useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within different sets of data because themes provide rich description and act as a dialogue to support the findings and on-going discussion.

In identifying the themes, the research aims to understand how children think and behave within a particular context to address the research questions. The themes contribute to a layered picture of knowledge and understanding of the visual data for each of the seven case study children and relate to what Guest (2012) considers implicit and explicit ideas emerging from the analysis. Content analysis revealed that the coding of the data cut across the different settings, situational contexts and case study children, allowing a multi-dimensional picture to take shape of different themes and their significance. This was also supported by the discussion with academics from different countries. The super-themes Participation, Voice and Ownership were deemed as central to children's empowerment in play as they were consistently discriminable in all of the video data and implicit in the interview data that supported the research.

## **6.7 Summary**

This chapter has considered the operational definition of codes for both the video and interview data. The content analysis was a significant part of the research, supporting reliability testing and enabling exploration of emerging themes. In organising the data analysis of what was happening during children's child-initiated, social play and the opinions



of parents and practitioners were able to be seen as a layered picture rather than in isolation or focused on a particular child. The ability to develop valid and repeatable interpretations of the research data; capable of being generalised for future research has been significant in this chapter and for the thesis as a whole; supporting the process of analysis.

In the next chapter the analysis outlined here is applied to the data, resulting in outlining selected findings from the research.

## **Chapter Seven: Findings**

This chapter brings together the analyses of the video and interview data from the research to make a case for the nature and impacts of children's empowerment in play. One of the most significant findings from the whole of the research is that there was never a moment in any of the observational video sequences where children looked as if they had run out of play ideas. There was a desire and motivation to use whatever resources they found within the different play contexts to follow their own interests and ideas to a conclusion or change their play into something else. There was a fluid exchange of ideas between children, discussion and experimentation to fuel their exploration and experience of play. The Findings chapter connects the case study children's play through the analysis of the video sequences into the organisation of super and sub-themes.

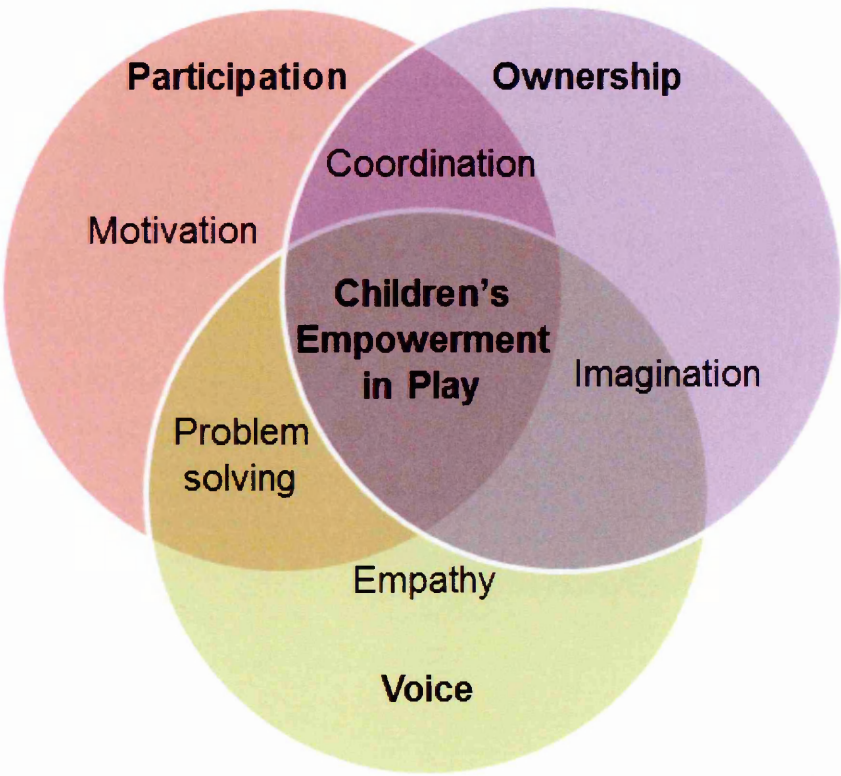
The first section explores the super-themes and sub-themes identified in the video data and their relationship with the codes used for the process of systematic content analysis of the video data. The three super-themes which emerged from the analysis of the video data; Participation, Voice and Ownership are then discussed in more detail. These are illustrated with examples from the video data and supported by the interview data from parents and practitioners. The links between the super-themes and sub-themes are explored to support a layered picture of children's empowerment through their play choices and experiences. The next section considers examples of the sub-themes Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy and explains their relationship to the super-themes. The final section considers the term 'empowerment' from the point of view of the early years practitioners and parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews. The chapter reintroduces the definition of empowerment and concludes with reflections on talking to the case study children.

## 7.1 Super-themes

Three super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership were identified as a result of systematic content analysis through the process of coding the video data, as described in the previous chapter. The super-themes were then cross checked with and corroborated by the content analysis of the interview data which gave an overview of the opinions and perspectives of those most closely associated with the case study children, their parents and early years practitioners. The three super-themes were not always transparent in the individual case study children's play, but considering the video sequences overall, together with the interview responses from parents and practitioners, the themes emerged as recurring and a significant although subtle part of what supported children's process of empowerment. The super-themes represent the observed commonalities in children's actions and behaviours from the video data across different contexts and provide a basis for rich description of the video and interview analysis (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). As such, children's Participation, Voice and Ownership were discriminable in all of the video data and interpretable in the interview data that supports the research.

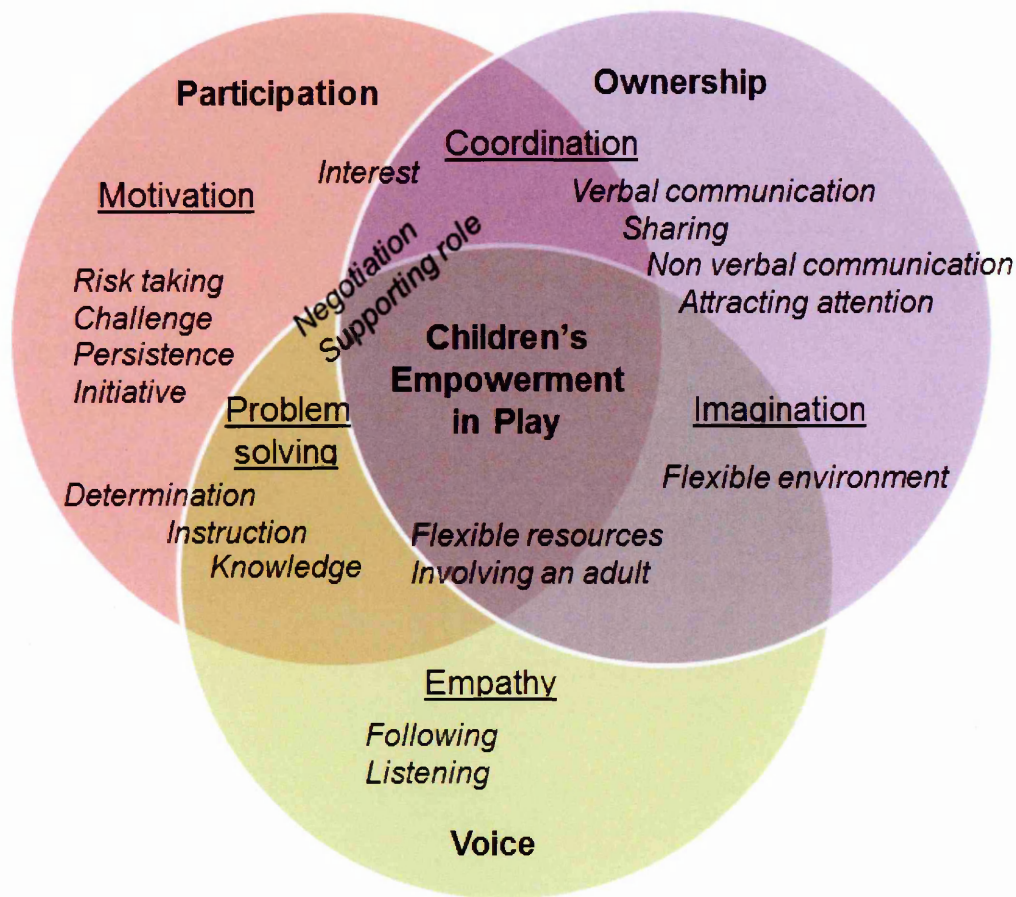
The diagram below positions the super-themes as interdependent and with the potential to all be present in child-initiated, social play simultaneously or for just one or two to be present. It became apparent that although it didn't matter if one, two or all of the super-themes were identifiable in the children's play, at least one was needed for the child to be viewed as having an empowering experience. In the clearest examples of children's empowerment, all three super-themes were present during play and parents and early years practitioners alluded to the themes through the interview process. The sub themes of Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy categorise recurring instances and actions in children's play which support the development of the super-themes.

Figure 7.1: Positioning of the super-themes and sub themes



The next figure shows the relationship between the systematic coding of children's actions and reactions, capturing instances during the video sequences of children's choices and their decisions, the context of children's play in respect of the environment and resources and interactions between children. The full rationale for the codes can be found in the previous chapter, but figure 7.2 illustrates the connectedness between the video data operational codes and the super and sub-themes

Figure 7.2: Video data codes (in *italics*) and their relationship to the super-themes (in **bold**) and sub-themes (underlined) of the research



### 7.2 Examples from the research data

The table below provides a visual matrix of selected examples from the research data for each of the case study children that illustrate the three super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership. These examples have been selected as they cover different settings including the children's' home where observational video data was collected. They include accounts of play filmed in a mixture of both indoor and outdoor environments and also show how the video footage links with data from the second and third sets of interviews when practitioners and parents reviewed some of the video data as part of the interview process.

Figure 7.3: Super-theme matrix

	Participation	Voice	Ownership
Ethan	<b>004 Den making</b> Children’s centre, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 3		<b>005 Water butt</b> Children’s centre, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 3 and parent interview 2
Henry		<b>012 Loud speaker</b> City centre private day nursery, <b>inside</b> Practitioner interview 3 and parent interview 2	
Lucy	<b>003 Banging table</b> Rural private day nursery, <b>inside</b> Parent interview 2		<b>018 Stack and chime</b> Rural private day nursery, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 3
Abigail		<b>012 Tyre 2</b> Rural private day nursery, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 3 and parent interview 2	
Matthew		<b>001 Selecting cars</b> <b>childminder</b> , <b>inside</b>	<b>008 Tyres and Poles</b> Rural private day nursery, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 3 and parent interview 2
Jessica	<b>008 Building a tower</b> Rural private day nursery, <b>inside</b>		

	Participation	Voice	Ownership
Max		<b>009 Traffic Jam</b> City centre, private day nursery, <b>outside</b> Practitioner interview 2	<b>005 Obstacle course</b> <b>Home</b> , <b>inside</b> Practitioner interview 2

The next section offers an in depth analysis of three examples drawn from this matrix that illustrate the super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership:

- Ethan den making with his peers outside at the Children’s Centre, providing a rich example of participation between children;
- Henry involved in imaginative play with his friend at the city centre private day nursery gives an example of how he uses his voice within the play situation;
- Matthew concentrating on climbing car tyres to slide down a pole outside at the rural private day nursery, illustrating his sense of ownership over his play.

The analysis of these three examples is also supported by extracts from the interview data. Each example contains a brief synopsis of the video that gives an overview of what happened in the whole of the sequence followed by a break-down of how the sequence was coded, including a brief definition of the code and the video timing. The sub-themes of the research are also applied to the examples, indicating the relationship between the systematic coding applied to all of the video data and the overall themes of the research.

### 7.3 Super-theme 1: Participation

In this research and as discussed in the literature review, participation is considered specifically within the context of children’s play and is analysed as a process involving the

social relationships taking place between children's peer social relationships rather than between adults and children. Participation emerged as a super-theme of the research because, for all of the case study children, the video analysis of their play revealed that they had choices: they could make the decision to start or join an existing play situation; if they wanted to, they could make a connection and participate with another child or group of children. Once play was underway, there was then a constant underlying process of negotiation among children as to whether to simply be involved or to lead the play; whether to contribute through words or actions; how to position themselves alongside other children who they felt comfortable with; whether to argue their point and/or consider whether their view was worth fighting for.

In this study, the data indicates that as well as choosing whether to not to join an existing play situation, participation also involved children in making active decisions about the level of social investment they wanted to make; that is what they chose to do and how they chose to behave and react towards other children. Thus, their contribution in play is through their actions and active engagement with other children and, as Treseder (1997) suggests, can be seen to reflect the cultural context in which they are situated. In terms of the settings observed in this study, all of the social play situations offered opportunities for participation between children without adult intervention, and this enabled children to take part on their own terms.

### *7.3.1 Participation: Ethan – 004 Den making*

The figure below shows Ethan between his two friends as they look for sticks and branches to build their den in the woodland area of the city centre Children's Centre. The table that



follows is a written account of the video sequence, the coding decisions made and how those codes correspond to the sub-themes of the research.

Figure 7.4: Ethan den making at the city centre Children’s Centre



Figure 7.5: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Ethan - 004 Den making

Focus Child	Ethan
Location of video clip	Children’s centre: outside
Video clip source	Ethan 004: Den making.mpg
Total length of video clip	02.06.11
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b> Ethan is playing with three other boys, outside in the woodland area. He is collecting large sticks and leaning them against a tree to make a ‘Ben 10’ treehouse (Ben 10 is a cartoon character who has a watch-like alien device that allows him or anyone who wears it to turn into alien creatures). The other boys are joining in the play, adding sticks to the pile. Ethan is collecting sticks from nearby and bringing them back to build the den. He is talking to the	

other children, suggesting what they could do next and what he wants to do. Some of the other boys protest at his actions and suggestions, but Ethan carries on and moves onto collecting more sticks quickly.		
Codes	Timing	Description
Verbal communication  Links to sub-theme: Coordination	00.06.23 – 00.10.90	Ethan verbally encourages the building of a 'Ben 10' treehouse to the other children. He describes the sticks as 'big and fat' and tries to organise the other children in bringing sticks to build the structure of the den.
Knowledge  Links to sub-theme: Problem solving	00.05.12 – 00.12.01	Ethan knows what to do with the sticks in order to build a den against a large tree. He uses the tree as the main support for the sticks so that the den structure can start to take shape.
Negotiation  Links to sub-theme: Coordination	00.50.14 – 00.58.20	Ethan negotiates with another boy over a large stick and persuades him to let go of the stick so Ethan can place it where he wants it.
Instruction  Links to sub-theme: Problem solving	01.00.01 – 01.04.55	Ethan tells another child what to do with a stick in order to help build the den. He tells some other boys to stop playing in the mud and come and help.
Determination  Links to sub-theme: Motivation/problem solving	01.08.08 – 01.15.22	Ethan along with another boy moves a long twisted stick into position. They have several attempts, lifting the stick above their heads to lean it against the tree trunk.

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Sharing  Links to sub-theme: Coordination	01.09.68 – 01.13.74	Ethan is sharing the task of moving the long twisted stick into position. The boys are working together to place it where they want it.
Interest  Links to sub-theme: Motivation/imagination	01.19.41 – 01.20.95	Ethan shows interest in keeping a narrative going alongside building the den by suggesting that they go to bed, using his imagination to maintain a story.
Instruction  Links to sub-theme: Motivation	01.30.11 - 01.34.16	Ethan shouts to someone out of shot 'Hey come over here, this is our 'Ben 10' treehouse.
Determination  Links to sub-theme: Motivation	02.00.21 – 02.06.52	Ethan is on his own, as the other children have moved away from the play. He picks up a large stick and declares 'I'm taking this'.

This video sequence illustrates the features identified earlier in relation to the super-theme of Participation in a number of ways. The focus was on Ethan who was at the centre of the play and instructing others and taking the lead. Some of the other children may have had a different agenda to Ethan about what they wanted to do with the sticks: Ethan, however, was able to motivate the group to stay on-task. He was also able to be adaptable and develop the play so that the den eventually became a 'Ben 10' treehouse. Ethan led the process of play, including the children that wanted to join in, negotiating with the other children over the resources and building of the den. He was actively participating, physically building the den and believing that his contribution was making a difference within the play space. Ethan had his own agenda in the play, but he realised he could not build the den without the help of the

other children and therefore had to balance his motivation to finish the den with the realisation that other children also wanted to contribute. The practitioner who reviewed the video commented:

“Ethan was there at the forefront of it, but I thought they all worked really well together. They were all still contributing and going slightly further afield to look, you know, once they had got the sticks and logs that were close to the den, they knew to extend that search so that was lovely as well” (lead practitioner, Children’s Centre, interview 3).

“There was a lot of reinforcement between them, if Ethan said something, others would reinforce it by repeating it” (lead practitioner, Children’s Centre, interview 3).

### *7.3.2 Sub-themes*

The analysis of ‘Den making’ also illustrates how Ethan’s actions and behaviours could be described in terms of three sub-themes, Motivation, Coordination and Problem Solving that together contribute to the super-theme of Participation, identified in relation to this extract. In figure 7.2, the code of ‘determination’ is positioned between two sub-themes, Motivation and Problem Solving. In this example, Ethan’s determination to move a large stick and place it to become part of the den structure indicated his intentions that he was not going to give up on moving the stick; that he knew exactly where he wanted to place it and was going to make it happen. He had help, but was the driving force behind ensuring that the stick found its place within the den. He was problem solving as he went along, trying to lift and twist the stick, manoeuvring it into place and instructing the other child as he did this. In leading the play, Ethan took on a coordinating role using his verbal communication to give instruction and to some extent negotiate with the other children. He seamlessly demonstrated his motivation to

want to be at the centre of the play, with other children, leading what was going on, coordinating their ideas into his ideas and problem solving as he went.

#### **7.4 Super-theme 2: Voice**

The interpretation of children's play and their voice within that play centred on the decisions the case study children made and how they communicated their decisions to the other children they were playing with. In this next example, Henry is expressing his play preferences through his game with his friend. At first it seems as if nothing is happening in the play, a non-event without a clear start or finish, but Henry's voice is important in this sequence in determining what was happening in the play, what was important to Henry and what he wanted to say and do. The complex nature of the child's voice in the example is integral to empowerment as for Henry, experiencing and building social connections is not such a straightforward process as it is for Ethan. But in this example, Henry is able to be at the centre of the play process, demonstrate his capacity to adapt, and to acknowledge that some of his ideas will be accepted by other children and some will be rejected along the way.

##### *7.4.1 Voice: Henry - 012 Loud speaker*

This next example illustrates the super-theme Voice. The picture shows Henry sitting in a chair in the playroom at the city centre private day nursery. His friend is placing a rubber ring on Henry's head whilst he holds a toy loud speaker that forms a central part of their play together. As in the first example, the table that follows is a written account of the video sequence, the coding decisions made and how those codes correspond to the sub-themes of the research.

Figure 7.6: Henry at the city centre private day nursery



Figure 7.7: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Henry – 012 Loud speaker

Focus Child	Henry
Location of video clip	City centre private day nursery: inside
Video clip source	Henry 012 Loud speaker.mpg
Total length of video clip	02.03.32
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b> Henry has a toy loud speaker; he holds it over his head and accidentally hits his head with the toy. This seems to lead to an idea for a game with his friend. He holds his head and leans over a chair. He then sits in the chair and says to another boy 'I'm dead'. The other boy takes the loud speaker from him. Henry ignores the other boy and pretends to be asleep/dead. The other boy uses the loud speaker in Henry's face. Henry tries not to react. The other boy goes to the shelf and gets a rubber ring and places it on Henry's	

<p>head. Henry checks what it is with his hand then opens his eyes looking for the other boy who is hiding behind the chair. He gets up and walks away rubbing his head. The other boy follows and then they both return to the chair. The other boy sits down and Henry puts a rubber ring on his head. Henry then hides behind the chair. Henry takes the loud speaker from the boy who is pretending to be asleep/dead in the chair.</p>		
Codes	Timing	Description
<p>Attracting attention</p> <p>Links to sub-theme: Imagination</p>	00.22.70 – 00.36.58	Henry attracts the attention of another boy by saying 'I'm dead' and pretending to be dead/asleep in a chair.
<p>Interest</p> <p>Links to sub-theme: Coordination</p>	00.56.80 – 01.18.46	Henry shows interest in the other boy developing the play by going along with the rubber ring being placed on his head.
<p>Flexible Resources</p> <p>Links to sub-theme: Problem Solving/Imagination</p>	00.58.30 – 01.02.55	The ring and loud speaker are used to support the boys' exploration of being dead/asleep rather than their intended use as a rubber ring and plastic toy.
<p>Verbal communication</p> <p>Links to sub-theme: Coordination</p>	01.34.84 – 01.59.74	<p>Henry and the other boy talk about what they are doing as they play.</p> <p>(This is a particularly important point because of his parents' concern about Henry's speech, discussed below)</p>

Codes	Timing	Description
Listening  Links to sub-theme: Empathy	01.38.02 – 01.45.16	Henry listens to the other boys' explanation for the introduction of the rubber ring into the play and accepts it as part of the game. He is connecting with the other boy in going along with what he wants to do.
Negotiation  Links to sub-theme: Coordination	01.34.84 – 01.59.74	There is some negotiation between Henry and the other boy in what they are going to do next and how they are going to use the rubber ring and loud speaker in their game.
Following  Links to sub-theme: Empathy	01.33.45 – 01.59.88	Henry follows the other boy around when he has the loud speaker, then encourages him to follow when Henry has the rubber ring. Again, his actions support the development of a connection with the other boy.

Through close analysis, the sequence reveals subtle insights into Henry's play and how he expresses himself and uses his imagination. He uses the play resources to keep the interest of the other child through positioning himself on and behind the chair and using the loud speaker and rubber ring to support what he wants to do. As the play continues he is aware of how his actions trigger a reaction from his friend and then uses that reaction to continue and adapt the play. Henry uses different ways to communicate with the other child; verbally but also through what he does and how he uses the environment around him. His mother commented when she reviewed the video sequence:

“Henry didn't talk very much when he was younger and I was quite worried, we went to a speech therapist and that has helped him in his confidence to talk to adults and



other children. It's nice to see him sort of in charge here, not so much by what he is saying, but also by how he is reacting to his friend" (Henry's Mum, interview 1).

The interaction between Henry and his friend in the sequence supports Shier's (2001) view of participation and voice discussed in more detail in the literature review, where children support each other in expressing their views through words or actions. Henry's use of the resources enabled him to maintain the interest of the other child as well as express what he wanted to do. This also enabled Henry to take responsibility and the lead in the play when he attracted the other boy's interest initially, by pretending to be dead. Through his actions he was able to connect with the other child and adapt his play to ensure that his own interests and exploration of the resources were met, as for example, when he copied the other boy's use of the rubber ring. The lead practitioner from the private day nursery provided an insight into how Henry conveyed the super-theme of voice in this sequence:

"Henry's language sometimes goes into that baby kind of talk, but I think he uses that to his advantage because he can relate to other children easily. He is sophisticated in the way he gets other children to join in and do what he wants without being loud or assertive. At one point he walks off and the other boy actually comes running after him to drag him back into the game again. That says to me that he is an important part of what is going on and knows he doesn't have to shout to be at the centre of what is going on" (lead practitioner, city centre private day nursery, interview 3)

#### *7.4.2 Sub-themes*

The analysis of the video sequence 'Loud Speaker' illustrates how Henry's actions and behaviours can be described in terms of two sub-themes, Empathy and Imagination that

together contribute to the super-theme of Voice, identified in relation to this extract. In figure 7.2, the codes of 'listening' and 'following' are positioned in the sub-theme of Empathy. In this example, Henry's ability to listen to his friend and follow his ideas allows the play to continue and develop. Henry is working with his friend with a mutual understanding that they both need to be involved and have a say for the game to work and continue. The play had elements of imagination, for example with the theme of being dead/asleep which is returned to at different intervals during the play and with each boy taking it in turns to pretend to be dead/asleep. This also demonstrates the sub-theme of Coordination as throughout the boys are coordinating their actions to continue the play and to problem solve. For example, Henry wanted to get the loud speaker back and he did this by going along with the other boy's play until he had the opportunity to have the loud speaker and then created ways of keeping hold of it. This video sequence is central to the super-theme of Voice in the context of the research because, as the lead practitioner at the Children's Centre comments:

'It is not always practical to go with what a child wants or it is not always safe to do that, but I think it is important to go with it and see what happens, acknowledging what children have said is really important, but to watch them and see how they express themselves gives me a much better idea of what they want, what they are confident in and what further opportunities I need to plan to give them more confidence' (Interview 1).

Henry in his play was able to express his Voice through what he was doing and how he was interacting in his play, subtly listening and following his friend, showing empathy and interest in what was happening without having to be loud or opinionated and without dominating other children or resources. He also displayed the ability to have ownership over his play, showing

a sense of being comfortable in the situation and engaging in active interest with what was going on. The next example is a different play situation, but demonstrates the super-theme of Ownership for Matthew who is immersed in play involving climbing tyres and sliding down a pole.

### **7.5 Super-theme 3: Ownership**

As suggested in the literature review, (chapter 2.1.3) a sense of ownership can be powerful because children feel confident and safe in the play situation (Christensen, 2004). Children's active interest and engagement in contributing and influencing what is happening and taking a leading role in the play provides a basis for owning and developing their play.

Ownership of play also means that common interests emerge in the interactions between children; they begin to seek out each other to play with and often the same themes appear in the play. For example, 'Ben 10' was high on the agenda of Ethan's play featuring in different contexts but mainly with a group of other boys also obsessed with the television characters. Treseder (1997) argues that when there is a sense of ownership in children's play there is also group cohesiveness in working together, coming up with creative solutions to problems and children feeling able to express their personality and emotions. The findings in this study are very much in accordance with these observations. This quote from the lead practitioner at the Children's Centre, for example, encapsulates the way in which children's ownership of their play can evolve and how the significance of ownership is realised by practitioners and parents:

'I have said to some parents, 'why don't you give that a try, or when you go for a walk just...' and one parent said 'we go for a walk in the fields all the time', but the other

day she said, 'we didn't walk, we stopped and did what he wanted to do and that was because of Forest School, because we did Forest school and I didn't realise that he wanted to do all of these things'. That was maybe investigating the insects or making a den or just standing still and looking at things, and she said, 'that was a real eye opener for me, we used to go for this walk and I used to think I was providing this wonderful experience for him, but actually I wasn't doing what he wanted to do, I was doing what I thought he wanted to do. When we go now, we don't go as far, we don't need to go as far and we just go at his pace'. For me that is empowerment, for the child to be able to own that experience and be able to get that across to his parent' (lead practitioner, Children's Centre, interview 1).

#### *7.5.1 Ownership: Matthew - 008 Tyres and pole*

The next example, of the super-themes 'Ownership' shows Matthew just about to attempt to jump onto a pole in order to slide down it, outside at the rural private day nursery. This example illustrates how, by contributing and influencing what is happening and taking a leading role in the development of play, children demonstrate 'Ownership'.

Figure 7.8: Matthew at the rural private day nursery



Figure 7.9: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Matthew – 008 Tyres and pole

Focus Child	Matthew
Location of video clip	Private day nursery: outside
Video clip source	Matthew 008: Tyres and Pole.mpg
Total length of video clip	01.59.00
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b> Car tyres are stacked near a metal goal post structure outside in a field at the back of the day nursery. Two boys are using the tyres to climb onto, reaching for the upright pole of the goal post and sliding down the pole. A girl joins the play and all three children attempt to climb and slide down the post.	

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Flexible resources  Links to sub-theme: Problem Solving	01.25.89 – 01.42.66	Matthew and the other boy and girl are stacking the four car tyres, making the pile higher, then taking a tyre away and making the stack smaller. Matthew holds a tyre upright and moves it towards the metal post for the girl to try and stand on whilst she reaches up to grab the post, then Matthew moves the tyre closer to the stack of tyres for the boy to attempt to stand on the upright tyre.
Initiative  Links to sub-theme: Motivation	00.36.40 – 00.50.00	The other boy moves away and Matthew attempts to climb the stack of tyres alone. The boy returns and holds the upright tyre steady so Matthew can climb up it.
Negotiation  Links to sub-theme: Coordination	00.20.60 – 00.29.69	Matthew and the other boy discuss where the upright tyre should be held so it can be made steady in preparation to be stood on.
Supporting role  Links to sub-theme: Coordination/Problem Solving	01.01.60 – 01.13.90  01.40.57 – 01.46.80	Matthew holds the upright tyre and the stack for the other boy to attempt climbing.  Matthew holds the upright tyre steady with the girl whilst the other boy attempts to jump from the tyres to the metal pole.

In this video sequence Matthew appears confident and comfortable in what he is doing, and his actions fit many of the features of play identified with Ownership as outlined above. He had knowledge of what it would take to get to the top of the pole in order to slide down it and was not afraid to take charge of the situation so he could fulfil what he wanted to do. He was actively interested and engaged in the play, influencing what was happening through

organising the tyres on the ground. Matthew was following his own interests in the pursuit of being able to slide down the pole and had total ownership of the situation, leading and organising the other children. Matthew had the support of the other children who wanted to do the same thing as he was attempting, but he had control of the immediate environment, something that Treseder (1997) considers important in establishing ownership over a particular space or area. Matthew demonstrated his knowledge of the situation and what it would take to achieve his aim of sliding down the pole. He used that knowledge to support the other boy. Both his Mother and the lead practitioner who reviewed the video commented on this:

“They were empowered from each other. I think it is trust in each other and it was really interesting to see when the little girl went in the play didn’t stop, they just accepted her” (Matthew’s Mum, interview 2)

“It was their play wasn’t it? Matthew was totally engrossed in what he was doing. He had a goal and was going to achieve it” (lead practitioner, rural private day nursery, interview 3)

### *7.5.2 Sub-themes*

In this example of the super-theme Ownership, there are also rich examples of the sub-themes Motivation, Problem Solving and Coordination. Matthew seems to be motivated by the challenge of the situation and he demonstrates his complete ownership over the play space in organising the other children, ensuring that he has the best opportunities to climb the tyres and show his skill in sliding down the pole.

In many of the examples of the video data, and especially this one, sometimes the fit between the super-themes and sub-themes are not clear cut and there are elements of overlapping of codes, sub-themes and super-themes. Figure 7.1 illustrates to some extent the overlap between the themes and as this example demonstrates the codes and sub-themes cannot necessarily be uniquely associated with any one super-theme. The next chapter analyses the implications for this in greater detail.

**7.6 Specific examples of sub-themes from the video data**

The findings so far have concentrated on three examples illustrating the super-themes of the research; Participation, Voice and Ownership. The next section provides examples from the video data, supported by the interview data of the sub-themes which, although they act as a supporting role to the super-themes, are significant in their own right within children’s play and contribute to children’s empowerment. The table below illustrates a visual matrix of selected examples from the research data for each of the case study children that support the sub-themes, Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy. These examples have been selected as they cover different contexts where video data were collected and draw attention to the relationship between the sub-themes and super-themes.



Figure 7.10: Sub-theme Matrix

	Motivation	Coordination	Imagination	Problem Solving	Empathy
Ethan	<b>001 Making a train track</b> Home, inside			<b>007 Mixing</b> City Centre Children's Centre, outside Parent interview 2	
Henry		<b>005 Cardboard box</b> City Centre, private day nursery, Inside Practitioner interview 3	<b>001 Play fight</b> City Centre, private day nursery, Inside Practitioner interview 3		
Lucy	<b>011 Painting with Abi</b> Rural private day nursery, inside Parent interview 2				<b>007 Wind chime</b> Rural private day nursery, outside Parent interview 2
Abigail	<b>010 Catch</b> Rural private day nursery, Outside		<b>013 Hospital play</b> Rural private day nursery, Inside		

	Motivation	Coordination	Imagination	Problem Solving	Empathy
Matthew				003 Stick Fight Rural private day nursery, outside	
Jessica		001 Rolling pipe Rural private day nursery, outside Childminder interview 1 and Practitioner interview 3			002 Finding people Home, Inside
Max	004 Pipes City centre private day nursery, outside Parent interview 2		008 Showjumping Home, outside		

The next section provides examples of video sequences which illustrate the sub-themes and show how the codes used in the content analysis of the data support the sub-themes and subsequent super-themes.

### *7.6.1 Motivation*

The sub-theme of motivation is positioned within the super-theme of participation as in the research, all of the case study children participated in play when they were motivated to do so through their own conviction or through the support of their peers. In terms of the coding scheme discussed in the previous chapter, Motivation is characterised by risk-taking, challenge, persistence and initiative. The play was child-directed and therefore an open-ended process for those involved. The motivation to play was driven sometimes by individual children leading the play and sometimes by a group of children working together towards a common aim such as building a den or, in the example below from the video sequence of Max, comparing lengths of pipe. Andrews (2012, p19) suggests that children are motivated when they choose how and when to play with the 'impulse to play coming from the child as they seek opportunities to pursue their interests'. Another of the case study children, Abigail also was highly motivated in her play. Abigail's mother commented on her child's motivation to stay focused on what she is playing with after reviewing some of her daughter's play at home and at nursery:

'Abi does her own thing most of the time at home, I just let her get on with whatever she is playing and she can concentrate on that for a long time, she doesn't need me to be with her. She is the same at nursery; I sometimes have to drag her away from what she is playing with the other children' (Abigail's Mum, interview 3).

The motivation to play enables children to express their preferences and become powerful social participants in their own right in the way they are able to make choices and decisions. The lead practitioner from the Children's Centre reflected on how children's motivation and their decision making skills impact on opportunities for play:

'There was a little girl playing today that doesn't normally speak, that stands back and doesn't join in, but there was a 'wow' moment today to see her running around with a bucket in hand going 'well I'll get this and I'll put this over here and we'll do this' and actually joining in. And for Mum that was a 'wow' moment as well. We have all noticed that she has made that transition to being part of the group rather than standing back and just being on the periphery all the time' (lead practitioner, Children's Centre, interview 1).

The desire to want to play and be motivated to join in with others for this little girl has opened up a whole range of new opportunities, experiences and potential for engaging and making new friends. In the example below, Max is also demonstrating the significance of being motivated through his play to make new discoveries. The codes apportioned to this video sequence all support the sub-theme of Motivation for children's play. A visual representation of this can also be found at the beginning of this chapter in figure 7.1.

Figure 7.11: Max comparing lengths of pipe at the city centre private day nursery



Figure 7.12: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Max – 004 Pipes

<b>Focus Child</b>		Max
<b>Location of video clip</b>		City Centre Private Day nursery: outside
<b>Video clip source</b>		Max 004: Max Pipes.mpg
<b>Total length of video clip</b>		01.03.28
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b>		
<p>Max is comparing his length of pipe with another child's plank of wood. He holds his pipe up in the air and the child with the plank of wood does the same. Max walks towards the practitioner who is engaged with another child. He lets the pipe rest on the floor. He goes back to the child with the plank of wood and follows his lead in reaching the pipe up the wall. He shows the practitioner what he is doing when she comes over.</p>		
<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interest	00.00.00 – 00.07.51	Max compares the length of his pipe with another child's plank of wood. They both look up to see which is longer. They turn away from comparing the materials at the same time.
Initiative	00.09.30 – 00.15.85	Max lifts his pipe into the air holding just one end of the pipe, making it go higher. The other child follows his actions.
Challenge	00.27.95 – 00.42.98	Max watches the other child lean his plank of wood against the wall. Max follows his actions, but then tries to stretch his pipe higher up the wall by lifting it up. The other boy then tries to do the same.
Persistence	00.53.34 – 01.03.28	Max and the other boy keep trying to lift their piece of wood/pipe up the wall to see whose can go higher.

### *7.6.2 Coordination*

The sub-theme of coordination is positioned between the super-themes of Participation and Ownership as the case study children showed that to be coordinated in both their physical and emotional state they had to have ownership over their movements within the play space, as well as independent thoughts about what they were going to do in their play. Not only did children have to coordinate their own emotions, states and movements in the play space, but they also had to be considerate of the other children around them. Their ability to do this allowed them not only to participate in play but also have ownership of their role within the play. Hughes (2001) recognises that children's coordination is significant in their play because it supports children not only to be adaptable in their physical movements but also in their responses both verbal and non-verbal to other children through their actions and gestures. The extract from the following interview offers an interesting example of how Jessica, one of the case study girls achieves this kind of coordination.

'She knows what she is doing when she is playing and she is not afraid to let everyone else know as well! I think sometimes the other children think she is a bit bossy; she tells them what to do and how to do it, but somehow she gets them all involved and in the end everyone is playing along with her' (Jessica's childminder, interview 2)

Below is a video sequence of Jessica demonstrating this type of coordination, outside at the rural private day nursery where she has taken charge of coordinating the other children in rolling a large pipe down a hill.

Figure 7.13: Jessica rolling a large pipe at the rural private day nursery



Figure 7.14: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Jessica – 001 Rolling pipe

<b>Focus Child</b>		Jessica
<b>Location of video clip</b>		Private day nursery: outside
<b>Video clip source</b>		Jessica 001: Rolling Pipe.mpg
<b>Total length of video clip</b>		02.02.32
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b>		
A group of children are standing on one side of a large black pipe and rolling it, by pushing it with their hands across a field. As they do this the pipe picks up speed. A number of children then move away from the pipe and return when a child crawls into the end of the pipe. The group of children then focus on the children who have crawled inside the pipe at either end.		
<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interest	00.00.00 – 00.16.79	Jessica and other children are standing one side of a large pipe, pushing it with their hands to see what happens. The pipe starts to role across the field.

Codes	Timing	Description
Verbal communication	00.17.05 – 00.22.36	Jessica shouts to the other children to keep pushing the pipe.
Non-verbal communication	00.33.21 – 00.50.45	Jessica breaks away from the group, her physical movement indicating that she has had enough of the game. She eventually returns and some of the other children follow her lead.
Interest	00.51.60 – 01.02.73	Jessica looks with the other children into the end of the pipe where a child had crawled. She then runs towards the other end of the pipe.
Flexible environment	00.15.17 – 00.27.89	The space in the field allows Jessica to run away from the game that the other children are involved in and return as and when she wants to.

The codes in this sequence are all located around the sub-theme of Coordination and also closely relate to some of the codes linked to Motivation. The nature of the sub-theme Coordination means that it is located between the super-themes of Participation and Ownership, implying that it is hard not to be actively participating whilst having Ownership of the play. In the same way, the sub-theme of Imagination is located between the super-themes of Ownership and Voice but is also open to interpretation depending upon the play situation and how children respond to what is happening and how the play develops.

### 7.6.3 Imagination

In each play situation throughout the research it was observed that children were freely able to use their imagination to develop their play both as individuals and in a group with other children. It was evident that children sometimes were immersed in their own imaginative



game, whilst playing alongside others, in parallel play, whereas at other times they shared their imaginative thoughts with other children as a way of encouraging them to play the same game. Imaginative ideas and play were owned by the children and how these were extended, adapted, or changed was driven by the play situation and the other children present. The following extract from an interview with Max's mother corroborates Sawyer's (1997) observation that imagination and creativity in play is perpetuated by the interplay between children especially in social group situations.

'Max has got a great imagination, he thinks up all sorts of things triggered by perhaps something he has picked up at nursery or something that he has seen on TV. He is able to go, almost into his own world, you know? Lose himself in what he has created in his head and then play it out with his friends' (Max's Mum, interview 1)

In the next example, Max demonstrates his imagination through pretending to be a horse show jumping over obstacles he has constructed in his garden at home.

Figure 7.15: Max 'show jumping' in his garden at home



Figure 7.16: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Max – 008 Show jumping

<b>Focus Child</b>		Max
<b>Location of video clip</b>		Home
<b>Video clip source</b>		Max 008: Max Showjumping.mpg
<b>Total length of video clip</b>		02.36.40
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b>  Max is at home in the garden. He appears to be running circuits of the garden, jumping over obstacles in his way. He is running on the lawn, down steps across the patio and up onto the lawn again. Towards the end of the clip, Max announces that he is show jumping and he has won. His mother gives him a medal and he announces he is now going to do hurdles.		
<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Challenge	01.50.42 – 02.06.16	Max is running circuits of the garden, jumping over things that are in his way. He falls over after coming down the patio steps, but gets back up and carries on. He then falls up the steps but again carries on.
Involving an adult	02.15.59 – 02.36.44	Max tells his mother he is show jumping and he has won. She gives him a medal for his achievement, recreating the podium at the Olympics where he accepts his medal from her.
Flexible resources	00.30.25 – 00.55.12	Max uses the natural environment of the garden and his own constructions to create show jumps and invent a course to jump.
Flexible environment	00.35.55 – 02.35.40	Max uses the garden as a show jumping track, adapting his jumping technique to incorporate the different aspects of the garden such as the steps

		and then using these at the end of the play as the medal podium.
Verbal communication	02.15.59 – 02.36.44	Max is able to convey to his mother his reasons for his play as he explains he is show jumping and what he is planning to do next in winning the hurdles.

#### 7.6.4 Problem solving

The theme of problem solving is also positioned between two super-themes; those of Participation and Voice. In this research study, problem solving was observed during play episodes when the case study children could be seen to be participating with other children concerned with the same problem, and when children communicated with each other to articulate their ideas. The need to engage in problem solving brought children together in many situations. In the play situations observed during the course of this research, children's problem solving and the verbal and non-verbal ways they expressed their ideas emerged as a key sub-theme in analysis of the video data. As the extract below from the interview with Henry's mother indicates, children's engagement in problem solving, exchanging ideas and developing ways of working together often result in creative responses which Loveless (2009) considers an integral part of the process of play.

'He's a bit of a thinker. He will sit there and work it out, it doesn't matter how long it will take and he gets a bit cross if another child suggests something he has already tried or thought about...He'll join in though if something is going on, like one of his friends got stuck in the branches of the tree at the Children's Centre and he helped him get down; work out where to step and where to hold onto until he was down'

(Henry's Mum, interview 1)

In the video sequence below, it is Matthew who is playing with another boy in the childminder setting. It shows that the sub-theme of Problem Solving is very practical to ensure that play can start or continue the way children anticipate.

Figure 7.17: Matthew selecting cars in the childminder setting



Figure 7.18: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Matthew – 001 Selecting cars

Focus Child	Matthew
Location of video clip	Childminder
Video clip source	Matthew 001: Selecting cars.mpg
Total length of video clip	02.01.36
Brief synopsis of video clip:	
Matthew and another boy are looking at toy cars in a plastic container. Matthew is selecting cars to play with. He finds a car that works with a wind up key that speeds across the floor when released. The mechanism is being temperamental and Matthew is	

trying to get it to work. There is discussion between the boys about why it is not working and they try several ideas to make the car speed across the floor.		
Codes	Timing	Description
Knowledge	00.16.36 – 00.40.02	Matthew knows how the car works with the key to make it travel across the floor. He shows the other child how it works and how it won't work on the carpet, but needs a wooden floor to go fast.
Verbal communication	00.16.36 – 00.40.02	Matthew explains to the other child how the car works with the key so that it will travel across the hard floor.
Instruction	01.24.67 – 01.39.39	Matthew says 'I just want to do this one and you do the other one' giving instruction to the other boy.
Determination	01.40.20 – 01.55.36	The other boy wants to have a go with the car, but Matthew holds on to it, saying 'I can make it work, just hold on'. He is struggling to take the key out of the car and keep it on the hard surface so it will speed away.

In this example, Problem Solving perhaps aligns more closely with the super-theme of Participation if the codes alone were taken into account, but through the description it can be seen that Matthew is asserting his Voice and controlling what is happening in the play through his knowledge of the car and how it works. A balance is required in interpreting the video data, taking into consideration not only the systematic nature of the coding process for content analysis, but also the context rich description provides in assessing the nature of sub and super-themes. In the final sub-theme, Empathy is positioned under the super-theme of Voice.

#### *7.6.5 Empathy*

In the majority of video sequences children were empathic to other children in the same play situation and they showed this in a number of ways through the choices they made in their play and their communication with other children. The case study children had choices about their responses and behaviour towards other children, and displays of empathy towards another child or children were an important feature of how they chose to express themselves. Empathy emerged as a recurring sub-theme in all of the observed play situations, as this next interview extract with Lucy's mother illustrates.

'I saw her once at nursery, a group of them were playing together and it was clear that another little girl was in charge. A little boy was getting really cross, because she wouldn't listen to him and Lucy just went straight up to him and gave him a big hug! She wasn't prompted or anything, just saw that he was upset and she wanted to make it better. I thought that was lovely' (Lucy's Mum, interview 2)

In this next example, Lucy and another girl are fascinated by a wind chime and it is the respectful interaction between the two girls which contributes to the sub-theme of Empathy.



Figure 7.19: Lucy standing on a crate at the rural private day nursery



Figure 7.20: Synopsis and coding decisions for video sequence Lucy – 007 Wind chime

Focus Child	Lucy
Location of video clip	Private day nursery: outside
Video clip source	Lucy 007: Lucy Wind chime.mpg
Total length of video clip	02.01.30
<b>Brief synopsis of video clip:</b>  Lucy and another girl are under a canopy outside looking up at the wind chime. The girl stands on an upturned crate to reach for the chime and swings it so that it makes a noise. Lucy asks to have a go but is shorter than the other girl and finds it difficult to reach. She does manage to have a go and then goes to get a chair to place under the chime so she is able to reach it more easily.	

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Description</b>
Verbal communication	00.38.78 – 00.07.10	Lucy asks the other child 'can I have a go?' and the girl lets her
Following	00.46.44 – 01.09.21	Lucy is trying to reach the wind chime from the upturned crate, following the turn of the other girl. She is stretching for the chime and eventually reaches it to swing it so that it makes a sound.
Listening	00.48.88 – 01.07.10	Lucy is listening to the other girl explaining how to reach up to the wind chime and the best way to move it so that it makes a sound. She then copies her actions when it is her turn.
Knowledge	01.30.65 – 01.55.30	Lucy is trying to reach the wind chime. She keeps trying, but the wind is spinning it, making it difficult to catch. Lucy gets a chair which is higher than the upturned crate, to position under the chime so that she is able to reach the chime once she has stood on it.

The girls are both following and listening to each other in the process of the play and also problem solving in getting the best out of the wind chime in terms of getting a higher chair to stand on so it can be reached more easily. They are turn-taking and both immersed in what they want to do. They are empowered in the play situation, both being able to make the wind chime work and sharing the experience with their friend. Allison, et al. (2011) suggests that being able to empathise encourages a connection with others, helps to understand others' feelings and behaviour and respond in appropriate ways. In the video sequence the girls are



connected to each other in the game they are playing. They understand each other's feelings in terms of wanting to reach the chime and recognising the importance of having an equal chance to do so. They respond sensitively and appropriately to each other through taking turns, helping each other climb up to the wind chime and reading each other's body language, for example when Lucy wobbles on the crate, the other girl stretches out her arms to help steady her.

The inclusion of Empathy as a sub-theme is one of the more challenging aspects of the research as it is sometimes elusive in individual video sequences, however, in reviewing the whole of the footage and comparing the case study children, Empathy in children's play is evident and an important aspect of the process of an empowering experience. The example of Jessica (002 Finding people) illustrated in the matrix grid and Henry (012 Loud speaker) analysed above in the section on voice, include empathy as both children show that they are able to understand somebody else's feelings and are sensitive to those feelings in their own play. In Jessica's example, she openly discusses with her sister how she feels about a friend moving away from the area and what it must feel like for her trying to make new friends.

In the next section, perspectives on empowerment are reviewed from the interview data from parents and early years practitioners where they allude to Participation, Ownership and Voice and some of the sub-themes when trying to articulate empowerment.

### **7.7 Articulating Empowerment**

As outlined in the literature review in chapter 2.1, the term empowerment is potentially ambiguous and being empowered is often assumed rather than discussed as a core

component of children's learning and development. The early years practitioners and parents in this study found it quite challenging to express what they felt children's empowerment was or what it might look like in practice.

'It's hard to define [empowerment] because it's not something I think about every day, it's not top of my list of priorities, but I just want children to have choices, be confident to make those choices and be able to change their mind if they want to' (key worker, city centre private day nursery, interview 2).

'Experiences are really important for empowerment; what they see, hear and who they interact with really inspires children in their play' (childminder, interview 1).

These two quotes support key features of Participation in relation to children having a choice and being able to make their own decisions. Some practitioners focused on the importance of children's experiences from the perspective of what it must be like for children to be involved in different play situations while others discussed how they responded to the requirement to support children to have those experiences within their settings. Many talked about how this was an intuitive part of their professional role rather than something planned.

'Empowerment sounds like a really strong word, but here we let children have free access to whatever they want, follow their interests and give them opportunity to explore them whether that is inside or outside' (lead practitioner, rural private day nursery, interview 1).

'For me it is just standing back and just observing and seeing what it is that children want to do and hopefully interpreting it right as well' (lead practitioner, Children's Centre, interview 1).

The responses also focused on the social dynamics of children's play. Practitioners were aware of the significance of children's interactions with other children and how those may encourage a process of empowerment (Jiang et al., 2011). In the following interview extracts the lead practitioner at the Children's Centre explains how she understands empowerment in practice. This relates to the sub-theme of Coordination where children begin to recognise that playing together can be fun and so organise themselves to ensure that their game can continue.

'They are just starting to play socially and I think that is a really important moment, when they accept each other and can play socially and move the game on as a group' (lead practitioner, Children's Centre, interview 1).

In the next extract the super-themes of Participation and Ownership are alluded to as the practitioner describes children making confident play choices and decisions. Those choices are affirmed through acceptance into the play with other children and immediate inclusion into what is happening.

'Children's empowerment for me is when a child can walk into a room and know exactly who they might want to speak to and that they can join in and that they don't need to hold back' (lead practitioner, Children's Centre, interview 1).

The interview data revealed considerable consensus amongst practitioners that enabling children to have choices in what they wanted to do and who they wanted to play with was the most important aspect of empowerment. In the next extract, the lead practitioner explains how she facilitates children's choices by making sure that the play environment has sufficient flexibility to support their imagination and the challenges they create for themselves.

‘To me empowerment is about self-led choices, so children are able to make their own choices and decisions as to what they want to play with and how they choose to play. In the classroom at the moment the children have decided that they want a role play rocket so that is what we have gone with. But when the children are playing in the rocket, it is not necessarily a rocket; it may be a boat, a castle or whatever’ (lead practitioner, city centre private day nursery, interview 1).

For parents, however, interview responses indicated that in terms of understanding the conditions promoting empowerment, the focus was more about children having positive experiences, both through social opportunities and a range of resources.

‘For me empowerment means what drives them, what feeds them opportunities and gives them their experiences’ (Matthew’s Mum, interview 1).

‘Empowerment is about feeling strong; feeling like you are in control’ (Lucy’s Mum, interview 1).

These two extracts support the sub-theme of Motivation as they suggest children are determined and challenge themselves through their play. Parents seem to imply that the motivation in play is important for empowering experiences because it is what children want to do and how they feel in that situation. For example, ‘feeling strong and in control’ are key aspects that Lucy’s mother considers central to empowerment.

The analysis of the interview data from early years practitioners' and parents' views about empowerment, alongside the analysis of video data of child-initiated, social play supports the development of the three super-themes and the sub-themes of the research. Their reflections support the notion that empowerment is not a fixed concept or idea and that the process of empowerment is reliant on the super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership being acknowledged as significant in children's play experiences.

The next section gives examples of Participation, Voice and Ownership taken from the findings to show how they inform the developing definition of empowerment. The research aim of a conceptual definition of empowerment began with the literature surrounding play and empowerment in chapter 2.7 and the initial findings from the pilot study conducted in June 2011. The data analysis from the main research has contributed to the definition and here specific examples from the findings are associated with key assertions of the definition. This authenticates the definition in research evidence and also shows how examples of children's empowerment in play are not always uniquely associated with one super or sub-theme.

#### *7.7.1 Towards a definition of empowerment*

Empowerment in child-initiated, social play is not one single action, event or circumstance. It is concerned with examining individual choices and decisions based on social interactions, emotional responses and environmental influences within situated boundaries and resources. There are essential components that contribute to young children's experiences of empowerment; these are Participation, Voice and Ownership.

### *7.7.2 Participation*

The process of empowerment in child-initiated, social play is made up of interactions with other children which may influence the motivation or direction of play. Examples from the Findings include Ethan den making, Matthew climbing tyres and sliding down the pole, Max comparing lengths of pipe and Jessica rolling a pipe.

How children decide to participate in play is significant. They may negotiate their way into the play situation, or be more assertive through taking the lead and instructing other children. Examples of assertive play are seen in Ethan taking the lead in the den making example and a more subtle example of negotiating play can be seen with Henry playing with the loud speaker.

They may challenge themselves through pushing their physical limits or encourage other children to try something new in order to sustain the play situation. There is a clear example of Matthew challenging himself to climb the tyres and slide down the pole.

Children may use their initiative to change the game or focus of the play to ensure the play continues. Max and Matthew both demonstrate their initiative in the play examples in the Findings chapter. Matthew moves the tyres closer to the pole to make it easier for him to climb after the children have lost interest. Max initiates comparing pipe lengths against the wall, encouraging the other boy to follow.

Becoming involved in established social play is also an emotional risk children take in joining in for the first time or expressing their interest in case they are rejected by the group. The little girl that joins Matthew climbing the tyres and sliding down the pole illustrates this as the play between the two boys is established, yet she goes over to the boys wanting to join in and they accept her into the play.

### *7.7.3 Voice*

Empowerment in children's play also manifests itself through children expressing their point of view in agreement or if it differs from others; and using different modes of expression to show their preferences. This may be through making decisions about the materials or resources they want to play with, the space they want to play in and the timing of their play. Henry illustrates the complexities of voice in his play example with the loud speaker and rubber ring. He is subtle in using his actions and the play resources to encourage his game to continue and to follow his own agenda. Ethan den making is a more obvious example of voice where Ethan is not afraid to tell anyone his opinion and back it up with his actions.

Expressing an opinion amongst other children who also have opinions requires confidence and self-assurance, especially in a large social group. Ethan demonstrates that he is leading the play by making clear statements about what he is doing and has confidence that the other children will follow his actions. Matthew in selecting cars is also clear that he wants to have control over the toy car and holds his ground, even when under pressure from his friend to let him have a go.

Through different ways of communicating with their peers, and having their opinions valued and heard by others, children are more willing to contribute their thoughts and ideas (Treseder, 1997; Matthews, 2003). The example of Lucy and the wind chime alludes to this as the two children are respectful of each other's ideas, help each other to reach the wind chime through listening to each other and following each other's actions.

#### *7.7.4 Ownership*

Children want to feel that they are part of something, for example a family, an early years setting, or part of a wider community (Prout and James, 1997). When children have a sense of ownership they engage with and support other children through their actions and interest in what is happening around them (Robson, 2011). Matthew in climbing the tyres and sliding down the pole is completely engrossed and committed to what he is doing. He is working with the other children to achieve his aim of sliding down the pole. Jessica in rolling a pipe also is engrossed in what she is doing and enjoying sharing the experience with the other children involved.

When children are able to engage with materials in different and creative ways, they have the opportunity to express independent thought and be able to follow it through to a conclusion of their own satisfaction. It is an emotive response of being included and a tangible experience of sharing something that has happened, been created or achieved together. In both the examples of Matthew and Jessica, the materials are being used in creative ways, i.e. rolling the pipe and then trying to crawl through the pipe. The children's actions and the way they develop the play are their own ideas and experimentations and therefore supports a sense of owning the materials and space and what they can do with them.




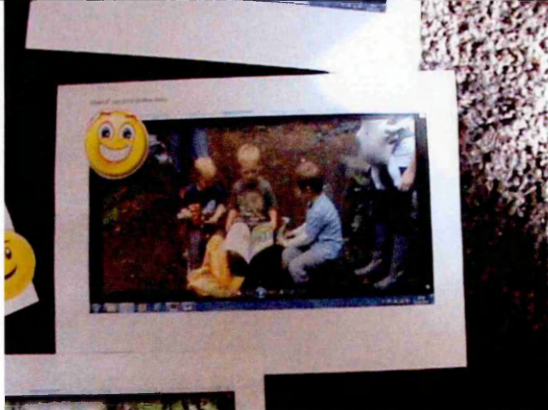
The children's play experiences were central to the research and this next section reflects on talking with children after the filming had taken place. It is important that it is included in the thesis as it was an opportunity for them to talk about their favourite play.

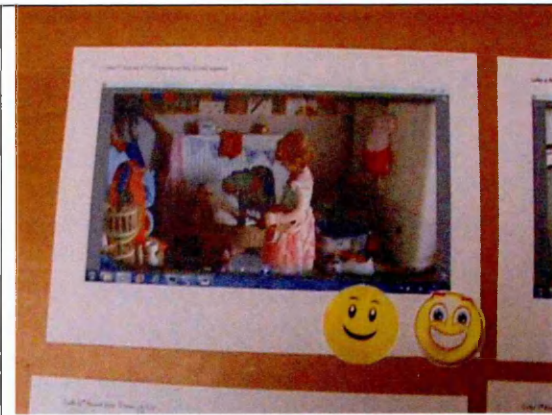
### **7.8 Talking with children**

Gaining children's views was an integral part of the research and at the end of the study once all of the filming and interviews had taken place, the case study children were asked about their likes and dislikes about play. The discussion was supported by still photographs printed from the video footage which showed the case study child playing in different contexts and with different resources. These conversations with children were conducted at the end of the study to avoid children feeling self-conscious about their play or thinking about what they were doing and why when they were being filmed. As described in section 4.2.1, stimulated video review with children during the pilot study was not particularly successful and therefore talking with children at the end of the research was considered to be a way in which to include their views. They were given smiley and sad face stickers to choose the play which they enjoyed the most and the least and then asked why they had chosen those particular photographs. The talks with children were conducted in the child's setting with a practitioner close by to support the child if needed or in their own home with a parent in close proximity, but not influencing the child. All of the children were happy to choose their favourite photograph and each gave a brief explanation of why they liked that photograph the best. They found it more difficult to put a sad face next to a photograph and explain their decision. This might have been because of their age; their understanding of what was being asked, or the prospect of talking to a relative stranger. Using sad faces was, however, a questionable method to take with young children as they may consider all play as fun and therefore not be able to decide which was their least favourite. Nevertheless, Clark (2005) argues that

children need to be acknowledged as experts on their own experiences and their opinions support the findings and conclusions of the research. The table below details the children’s responses about why they had chosen a particular picture to represent their favourite play.

Figure 7.21: Case study children’s choices of their favourite play

	<p><b>Abigail</b> sitting on one of the tractor tyres singing with Jessica and Lucy outside at the rural private day nursery.</p> <p>Abigail’s response: ‘I’m laughing’</p>
	<p><b>Ethan</b> sharing a book about the Gruffalo with friends. The boys are holding soft toy characters from the story outside in the Forest School area of the city centre Children’s Centre.</p> <p>Ethan’s response: ‘I’m with my friends and it’s my favourite story’</p>



**Lucy** at home in her bedroom, dressing up with her pet dog in the background and her sister just out of shot.

Lucy's response:

'I like to pretend and play with pretty things'



**Max** outside at the city centre private day nursery, comparing his length of pipe with another child's.

Max's response:

'It's my magic stick'

Researcher: Why is it magic Max?



'It can take me to the moon in a whoosh!'



**Jessica** rolling a pipe with the help of the other children, outside at the rural private day nursery.

Jessica's response:

'It was fun, we went fast'

	<p><b>Matthew</b> climbing a pole in order to slide down it, outside at the rural private day nursery.</p> <p>Matthew's response: 'I wanted to get to the top and I did it and it was fun and I beat Josh'</p>
	<p><b>Henry</b> outside sitting around the camp fire at the Forest School in the city centre Children's Centre.</p> <p>Henry's response: 'It's raining, I'm wet and catching the rain. They're my friends, it's fun'</p>

The children were reluctant to put sad faces on the photographs and most of the photographs in fact had smiley faces on them. So an extra smiley face sticker was given and the children asked to choose their most favourite photograph of them playing. These are the pictures in the table above. Matthews (2003) argues that it is important that children are given the opportunity have a say, that they are acknowledged in their opinions and engaged as far as possible in discussion. The sad and smiley faces were not intended primarily as a scale of 'liking', but were used as a way to get children talking to me about their play experiences. When it was clear that they were putting smiley faces on all of the pictures, the extra smiley face was used to ask them specific questions about their favourite play and why they enjoyed that so much.

## **7.9 Summary**

This chapter has explored children's empowerment in play through the analyses of the video data, the interviews with early years practitioners and parents and finally the talk with children. The three super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership have been contextualised through the analysis of the data with associations made between the operational codes and sub-themes to demonstrate each of the super-themes. The sub-themes of Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy have been analysed through examples from the video data again supported by extracts from the interviews with parents and practitioners. Evidence of children's empowerment in child-directed, social play has been presented throughout all of the video sequence examples and supported with reflections from parents and practitioners. Finally the findings from talking with children are presented, an attempt to obtain the views of the case study children into their favourite play. The children's views were an important aspect of the research, valuing their contribution and thoughts about what they enjoyed doing.

In the next chapter the implications from the findings in answering the three main research questions will be analysed alongside evaluating the research methods.

## **Chapter Eight: Discussion**

### **8.1 Where the study began – the empowerment of children**

The motivation for the research was to generate new knowledge about children's empowerment and specifically how empowerment could be supported through child-initiated, social play. The research also aimed to support early years practitioners in developing their awareness, knowledge and understanding of the power of play as a means to support a process of children's empowerment and develop a definition of empowerment that could be used as part of a conceptual framework in practice.

Framed within a sociocultural approach the research recognised the interdependence of cultural contexts and children's social interactions in play situations. Children's play is socially situated; Vygotsky (1978) argued that children have opportunities to think in more complex ways compared to structured learning when they play because of the variety of environments and resources that influence what they are doing. The research started from the position that Greene and Hill (2005) argue, which is that children relate to the world based on what they know of their own cultural context and the wider influences of society that they consider to be 'normal'.

The research in this thesis examined the meaning and significance of children's empowerment in a variety of play contexts. This is an original contribution to the field of Early Childhood providing an entry point through which to explore the possibilities for empowerment and the process of empowerment to be recognised as significant for children's development and learning. Throughout, and particularly in the literature review the thesis argues that play and empowerment are not straightforward or uncontentious concepts and



whilst practitioners, and to some extent parents, were able to articulate the importance of play, empowerment was not something that was readily associated by them for play or children.

This chapter re-visits the research questions and discusses how those questions have been addressed by the study and how they could be investigated further. The key aspects of the study are reflected upon, including the significance of cultural influences, the context of play and how interpretations and value judgements have influenced the research. In the previous chapter, the key findings were discussed and the significance of the super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership explored. The sub-themes, Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy were also illustrated and connected to the super-themes. The implications for the themes in the research are considered here in relation to the initial research questions. The findings of the research are then discussed for their relevance to early years practice and professional thinking and development.

## **8.2 Initial research questions and developments**

The three main research questions were explored through the collection and analysis of data relating to the seven case study children, filmed across five different early years contexts including their home environment. The non-participant video data was a central aspect of the analysis (Robson, 2011) and provided the opportunity for the footage to be reviewed by parents and practitioners. This added another dimension to the research as their recorded interviews gave insight into their understanding of children's play and empowerment and assisted in answering the first and third research questions.

Bringing together the different threads of the research through the video footage and interviews supported the ethnographic nature of the study and provided situated understanding of children's play (Brooker, 2002) to support the first research question. The qualitative nature of the data also supported understanding the philosophy and values surrounding the subject of children's play (Moyle, 2010) reflected throughout this thesis and revealed the significance placed on play within early years settings and the case study children's home environments. The three research questions are discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter:

### **8.3 Research question 1: In what ways can child-initiated, social play empower children?**

By focusing on child-initiated, social play the research adopted a particular position about play based on playwork principles in that:

'play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons' (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005 online).

This position shaped the study in exploring children's play, focusing on the interactions between children; how they participated and contributed in different play environments and contexts; how they utilised resources to support their play and how early years practitioners and parents responded and reacted when children were in charge of their own play. Although Hughes (1996, p22-23) suggests that 'both the content and intent of play should be determined by the child' and that play should be 'child-empowering', throughout this thesis,



the research has highlighted that empowerment is not just about a single action or event. It is not just about providing more child-initiated play opportunities for children (although this would be a positive step). As presented in the previous chapter, the research findings demonstrate that it is about recognising the different ways children create and sustain their Participation, Voice and Ownership in play and how these super-themes enable a process of empowerment.

The analysis of the observational video and interview data not only confirmed the importance of these super-themes, it established their interdependence, and also led to the identification of the skills, behaviours and types of environment that underpin these. This analysis corresponds well with previous research findings as outlined in the literature review, for example, Fromberg and Bergen (2015) suggest children's social play constantly evolves as they explore their interests, share ideas and use their environment and resources in imaginative ways. Child-initiated, social play may also empower children through the nature of play's unpredictability and open-endedness. Engaging in participatory processes, where the social dynamics are not predetermined or a final outcome expected, enables children to focus not only on play, but also the part they undertake in perhaps leading or influencing others. Cockburn (2005) suggest that the position of power that children can take on during play is important in understanding the nature of participation and negotiation. Children's active participation in play where they have an emotional investment in what is going on and wanting to be part of that situation (Matthews, 2003) is significant in children's motivation to be involved, have an opinion or voice within that situation and feel a sense of ownership in how the play is developing. The research findings presented in this thesis have led to the development of a conceptual framework that not only confirms the importance of these various play experiences, dynamics and processes for empowerment; but that also offers a

way of understanding how these contribute to the super-themes Participation, Voice and Ownership and related sub-themes, (see Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2 demonstrates how, the sub-themes identified in the research, Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy support the three super-themes as well as offering a categorisation of the skills that children use in play to create or sustain their involvement. The immediacy of the dynamic of play for children (Hughes, 2001) means that they sometimes have to think and act quickly to maintain their position in the play, for example if in leading the play a child voices a decision that other children do not like or want to participate in, they can easily walk away, re-group or override the decision. The leader of the play has to react quickly to maintain their role and the power they have over other children through using their social understanding of the situation. This complex nature of play is revealed through the analysis of the continually evolving play contexts where individuals and groups of children share and explore their interests (Fromberg and Bergen, 2015). The conceptual framework given in Figure 7.2 in the previous chapter also illustrates the way in which this research has approached the complex nature of play with a specific focus on children's empowerment. The unpredictability and possibilities of play contribute to the subjective nature of the research, but also to the multi-dimensional aspects of the study, such as the way in which children use their play environment and how they develop peer relationships in play.

### *8.3.1 Environment*

The research clarified the ways in which children's play can support the process of empowerment through different opportunities and experiences and social interactions. Understanding the contribution of the play environment towards the processes of

empowerment was central to the research as it was anticipated that it would influence the way in which children played together. Indeed, children used the space and resources around them in ways that were expected by the practitioners and researcher. For example in the Forest School, children made use of the branches and trees, incorporating them into their imaginative games. Waller (2006) suggests that opportunities to play in natural environments are valuable and significant to children's experiences and general well-being. In this thesis outdoor play in particular was seen to evoke a desire for children to be more physical in their actions, for example wanting to climb trees and being more animated in their verbal responses. Langston and Abbott (2005) discussed how children's play is influenced by their immediate environment as they use the resources available to them to develop and master skills, explore and problem solve, be creative and use their imagination. The research reported here also shows that this type of environment encourages play that challenges children and allows them to demonstrate initiative and risk taking.

The case study children in the research, although potentially influenced by their environment, did not rely on it solely to provide them with play ideas. There was never a moment in the research where the children looked as if they had run out of things to do or asked 'what shall we do now?' There was a desire and motivation to use whatever resources they found within the different play contexts to follow their own interests, ideas and explorations. In terms of empowerment, the study found that the range of contexts where the case study children were filmed all provided opportunities for children to Participate, have a Voice through what they said or did and to have Ownership within the play. Consequently, this study established that empowerment in play was not determined by the context, but was influenced by children's actions and reactions within that context. Empowerment therefore in this research is not

restricted by the environment or resources within it, but can be accessed by children through their interactions and the possibilities available through play.

Participation, Voice and Ownership for children is based on their terms, determined by their choices and decisions and negotiated between children in the play. Therefore empowering experiences are generated between children as part of an overall shared experience in play, even if children seem to have slightly different agendas. For example, in the super-theme example for Participation in the previous chapter (004: Ethan den making), Ethan has a clear agenda to build a den and while the other children share that motivation to some extent, they also engage in other play such as exploring the mud.

### *8.3.2 Sociocultural influences*

The research found that children's play experiences and familiarity of their cultural context promoted a process of empowerment supporting their self-confidence in the play space and their interaction with other children around them. Cultural influences were a central consideration in the research and a sociocultural approach formed the basis of the theoretical framework of the study. It is important to recognise the rapid social and cultural shifts of today's society where more children have multicultural backgrounds which incorporate many different traditions and values (Ling-Yin, 2007). Siraj-Blatchford (2014) argues that in play children recreate cultural contexts through exploring their interpersonal relationships with other children. In the current research, children demonstrated their cultural understanding through their play: this revealed what they knew about initiating and sustaining social relationships as well as their understanding of boundaries and what they could and could not do within a particular context. For example, in all of the settings in the study, the children

knew the boundaries of what was acceptable, what they could do within the space and how far they could venture before being told by an adult; parent or practitioner to come back. The children who attended more than one setting knew what was acceptable at the different locations and adapted their play accordingly. They recognised that they could engage with more physical play in the Forest School, moving logs and branches where they wanted and that there were different rules and expectations of them when in a more structured environment such as a Day Nursery. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006, p5) suggest that this is because children are capable of engaging with issues of different rules and ways of doing things, accepting different cultures, and that they 'actively regulate not only their own behaviour, but also that of others around them'. The flexibility and diversity offered by all of the early years settings in the study enabled children to have a sense of control within their play space which supported them to develop a sense of ownership over what they were doing.

#### **8.4 Research question 2: What is a valid and useful conceptual definition of children's empowerment in play?**

As discussed in chapter 6.1 and 6.6, the detailed operational coding and subsequent thematic analysis of the video observations of children's play gave rise to a conceptual framework that identifies three super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership as key to defining children's empowerment in play. The definition that was arrived at here is significant in that it does not locate itself within a particular context, instead it may be universally applied to any situation where child-initiated, social play takes place. This is offered as a unique contribution in the field of Early Childhood as a definition of empowerment may be accessible and transferable across play contexts.

The research sampled a range of locations, environments, resources and children to enable a spectrum of play circumstances to be considered. The analysis of the data through systematic coding and the identification of emerging themes supported the articulation of empowerment in children's play. The definition developed in chapter 2.7 focused on human and material factors which were acknowledged as connected and co-dependent. This was a starting point for the definition which has subsequently been developed based on the empirical data and analysis. The research identified the three super-themes, Participation, Voice and Ownership which built on those human and material factors from the initial pilot study. As such, the definition now reflects the findings from the research as outlined in the previous chapter and supports a conceptual framework for children's empowerment in play. The definition of empowerment presented in this chapter is the final definition supported by the data and findings from the research and provides an operational definition to use in practice alongside the conceptual framework (figure 7.2) which makes a unique contribution to the field of Early Childhood.

#### *8.4.1 Definition of empowerment*

The definition of empowerment resulting from this research states:

Empowerment in child-initiated, social play is not one single action, event or circumstance. It is concerned with examining individual choices and decisions based on social interactions, emotional responses and environmental influences within situated boundaries and resources. There are essential components that contribute to young children's experiences of empowerment; these are Participation, Voice and Ownership.

#### Participation

The process of empowerment in child-initiated, social play is made up of interactions with other children which may influence the motivation or direction of play. How children decide to

participate in play is significant. They may negotiate their way into a play situation, or be more assertive through taking the lead and instructing other children. They may challenge themselves through pushing their physical limits or encourage other children to try something new in order to sustain play. Children may use their initiative to change the game or focus of the play to ensure that it continues. Becoming involved in established social play is also an emotional risk children take in joining in for the first time or expressing their interest in case they are rejected by the group.

### Voice

Empowerment in children's play also manifests itself through children expressing their point of view in agreement or opposition with others and using different modes of expression to show their preferences. This may be through making decisions about the materials or resources they want to play with, the space they want to play in or the timing of their play. Expressing an opinion amongst other children who also have opinions requires confidence and self-assurance, especially in a large social group. Through different ways of communicating with their peers, and having their opinions valued and heard by others, children are more willing to contribute their thoughts and ideas.

### Ownership

Children want to feel that they are part of something, for example a family, an early years setting, or part of a wider community. When children have a sense of ownership they engage with and support other children through their actions and interest in what is happening around them. When children are able to engage with materials in different and creative ways, they have the opportunity to express independent thought and be able to follow it through to a conclusion of their own satisfaction. It is an emotive response of being included and a tangible experience of sharing something that has happened, been created or achieved together.

Articulating a better-informed and validated definition of empowerment for children's play brings together the different aspects of the research; video observations, coding of the data, talk with children and interviews from parents and practitioners. It gives an indication of what empowerment might look like in practice. The definition is significant in answering the third research question about implications for practice because it expresses a set of values and beliefs, based on the evidence from the research findings.

#### *8.4.2 Parents' and Practitioners' values and beliefs about play and empowerment*

This study clarified the extent to which play was embedded in the culture of the early years settings and the wider community. Practitioners and parents reflected on the value placed on children's play and recognised that the ambiguities regarding play and empowerment presented challenges in their thinking and decision-making in providing play opportunities for children. This is because of the fluid and unpredictable nature of what happens in children's play and the need for practitioners to constantly evaluate and reflect upon their role in supporting play, their understanding of play and empowerment and how they might challenge themselves to ensure their practice is a true reflection of their values and beliefs.

The views of parents contributed to understanding what is expected from children's play. Lester and Russell (2008) are sceptical about how parents see and evaluate play, suggesting that play is only approved of when it meets planned objectives or demonstrates socially acceptable behaviour. In the research, the views of parents and practitioners were very accepting of play as an important aspect of children's lives and gave insight into the case study children's play preferences (Interview set 2 from practitioners and interview set 1 from



parents). However, throughout the interviews with parents and practitioners there was a tendency to see play as something separate, fitted around other, more important things. This is reflected in the extract from a lead practitioner recalling a conversation with a parent about taking their child for a walk in section 7.5. Initially the parent thought the walk and the length of the walk was the most important thing, not what the child was engaged in whilst exploring. McInnes et al., (2011, p123) suggests that 'a lack of understanding of play combined with a mistrust of child-led activities and reluctance to give children choice and control, results in an over-reliance on adult led activities with adults having control and choice'. In all of the settings and home contexts there were elements of mistrust of child-initiated play with subtle comments made to children 'only for five minutes' or 'I'm watching you', or 'are you sure you want to do that?'; therefore establishing a sense of control, even if from a distance. These comments were made in the general conversation between children, parents and practitioners, observed whilst setting up for, or after filming, or when setting up for interviews with parents in their homes.

Some of the challenges for early years practitioners in encouraging child-initiated play in practice may be because of a limited knowledge and understanding of play (McInnes et al., 2011), parental attitudes towards play influencing what they do in practice (Fung and Cheng, 2012), confidence in their ability to champion play and its benefits, or the demands of the curricula (Wood, 2010a). Nolan and Kilderry (2010) acknowledge that practitioners need to be active learners in their context, rather than passive consumers of policies and newly emerging theoretical ideas. They define this as professional learning where perspectives are shared in a collegial and respectful environment. Leshem and Trafford (2006) argue that fresh professional perspectives can be achieved when practitioners have a deeper understanding of their own beliefs and experiences and where practitioners allow multiple

perspectives and approaches to inform their practice. Consequently scrutinising research into areas such as parental attitudes towards play may support practitioners in developing their knowledge and understanding (Veitch et al., 2006).

The cultural and pedagogical beliefs surrounding play are significant in how play is valued in a setting or context and how those values translate into everyday opportunities for child-initiated play. In the research there was evidence that practitioners across the different settings understood the significance and importance of children's play. They were aware of the benefits of child-initiated play for personal, social and emotional development and yet seemed to not realise the potential for children's empowerment in these play situations. Therefore, if the challenge is to enhance early years settings' recognition and instantiation of the potential for children's empowerment in play, one question must be how far those settings and practitioners have to change their thinking and practice in order for this to happen.

### **8.5 Research question 3: How can articulating children's empowerment in play support early years practice?**

The research supports a new way of considering what children do when they engage in child-initiated, social play. Common practice in England is to observe children and look for indicators that suggest children's learning and development in key areas defined by the curricula. Activities are planned around the key areas of learning and observations and assessment of children's competence then informs further planning (Howard, 2010). This process has become entrenched in early years practitioners' daily practice and although children's play is included in everyday practice and considered important, observations of play are mainly concerned with evidence of children's activity and outcomes. Pramling, Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argue that play should be seen from children's

perspectives and in doing so, consideration should be given to how children participate in a meaning making process with their peers to enable play to develop and be sustained. This thesis argues that if children's play is viewed from an empowerment perspective, this could initiate developments in professional practice and provide new approaches to observing and recording children's empowerment through analysing their Participation, Voice and Ownership in child-initiated, social play (see next chapter for how this might be achieved in recommendations for practice). However this puts demands on the practitioner to consider the child at the centre of the learning and development process and to observe and interpret what they are doing in specific ways. Many practitioners would argue that they already put children at the centre of their practice, but the difference is what they interpret as being important in terms of learning. For example, is developing cognitive skills more important than fostering appropriate personal and emotional responses? And what are the most effective ways to approach children's learning?

Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) suggest that in order for practitioners to adopt new ways of working or adopt different approaches to children's learning they need to have four core skills. They suggest it is essential for practitioners to:

- have a good general knowledge of child development to understand children's behaviour in different social play situations;
- have an insight into children's personal background and family circumstances;
- be able to sensitively interpret children's views;
- to show respect for children's competence and experience in their play.

The research has highlighted the significance of these skills in considering children's play in different contexts and from a sociocultural approach. It has adopted an interpretive

perspective on the analysis of the data and incorporated the child's view throughout.

Considering how children are empowered through play may help bring about a shift in early years practitioners' thinking and observations to embrace children's otherwise hidden qualities, where recognising empowerment may make a significant contribution to children's future play experiences, confidence and enthusiasm for exploration and discovery.

Stephen (2010, p15) recognises that the 'landscape of provision is shifting' and so in considering children's experiences in different contexts empowerment is a concept that could thread through those experiences to support children's holistic development. Variations in how practitioners interpret children's play can cause tension between practitioners in what they make of their observations in practice (Sylva and Pugh, 2005). Therefore an important implication of the research is that practitioners need to talk to each other, sharing their values and beliefs about children's play. Being actively involved in continuous professional development which focuses on active discussion about the significance of children's play as well as being self-reflective about how different play situations are interpreted would support a debate about children's empowerment in play. The sharing of values and approaches to practice may also support understanding inconsistencies in the way play is observed and interpreted.

#### *8.5.1 Revisiting values about children's play and empowerment*

Knowledge and understanding about play is constantly evolving and even in an early years setting, conflicting views can surface where approaches and values about play are openly discussed amongst practitioners about how to support quality play experiences. Bennett et al., (1997) argue that the type of early years setting experienced by children is in part determined by practitioners' understanding of play and therefore it is important that different

values about play and where they come from are recognised. Being open to different perspectives on children's play supports a 'can do' disposition towards children which Kalliala (2009) argues relates to practitioners as 'activators' who can identify children's interests and support subsequent play to develop. Practitioners as activators need to be aware of power relationships that exist between children and adults and also the power dynamics of the setting. This awareness supports a reflective approach to understanding practitioners' values and beliefs which can then be explored in relation to the decisions practitioners make in supporting children's play. Brown (2003, p58) suggests that 'children who have little control over their world inevitably have fewer positive experiences, which in turn slows the development of their self-confidence ... children who lack confidence are less likely to take risks or try out different solutions to problems they encounter'. The same can be argued to be true for practitioners in expressing their understanding about play as considering values and beliefs and engaging in self-reflection on personal practice is challenging (Canning, 2010; Howard, 2010). Not only is it important to recognise and analyse current working practices, but also to understand how they have evolved and on what basis they were implemented. Acknowledging these factors supports understanding of the power relationships that exist in relation to practitioners feeling able to express their opinions about children's play.

If discussions about play are not challenging enough, adding the dimension of children's empowerment adds a further layer of complexity. The research in this study has shown that through child-initiated, social play, in which children engage in a process of empowerment, recognising empowerment is subjective in interpreting children's actions and interactions. Exploring children's empowerment in play adds to the debate about the significance of the context and experience of children's play, and how children make sense of the world around

them (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Moyles, 2010; Rogers, 2011). In practice, making connections between children's play and empowerment may support practitioners' understandings of every aspect of the child, influencing the way in which they work with individual children.

In the next section the decisions made throughout the research are reflected upon, through the choices made in the methodology and how they influenced the research and the findings. The reliability of the research is considered and how the methods may be transferable to other contexts for further research and development.

## **8.6 Assessment of the Methodology**

The initial research focus, methodology and data collection generated a visual and written record of children's play and insights from early years practitioners and parents. In analysing the data, interpretations of children's actions and reactions in play are grounded in the evidence from the video sequences, parent and practitioner interviews.

### *8.6.1 Checking the match between codes, sub and super-themes*

The video data were viewed and coded according to the focus of the research questions and an initial ten percent sample was scrutinised by an independent Early Years academic professional to check the reliability of the operational coding scheme (see chapter 6.4). This was a crucial part of the early stages of the methodology to ensure that the operational codes and descriptions were clear to someone not involved with the research and that they coded the video sequences consistently in line with the interpretations made by the researcher. Differences between the reviewer and researcher were resolved through discussion until a

common understanding was arrived at and the operational definition accordingly modified. This process enabled the rest of the video sequences to be coded with confidence that interpretations of the data had been derived in a consistent way.

The checking of understanding when devising coding schemes is common practice between team members on large research projects (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, the process of checking the reliability in the study was important to validate, to some extent, the coding scheme and to also check the subjective decisions being made by the researcher. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) consider that recognising the subjective nature of qualitative research and being proactive in making provision for reliability testing is important. Although the research was located in an interpretive paradigm the reliability testing through an independent Early Years academic was significant to know if the operational codes were clear and understandable by a third party. This process acted as a safeguard for researcher bias and took place at the beginning of the research to support confidence in continuing to code the remaining video.

Using a third party to analyse the operational codes against the video data was seen as a strength of the research and was not intended to be a quantitative exercise for generating statistical evidence. In the long term the research may be used in the wider early childhood community and therefore the language and descriptions used for the code explanations and definitions had to be accessible and able to be applied to the video data. In considering the reliability of the coding scheme the research was mindful how people construct knowledge and meaning that enables a contextual narrative to be developed around children's play experiences. The approach to the reliability testing in this research was to explore the

contextual narrative being developed beyond the individual researcher opinions and interpretations. If time had allowed it would have also been useful to ask an early years practitioner to code a sample of video sequences to see if their interpretation was consistent with an academic view. A parents' perspective may also have been valuable in cross referencing views between parents and practitioners.

The super-themes and sub-themes emerging from the coding scheme were also discussed and analysed with a group of Early Years academics from the UK, Australia and Malaysia in a small focus group after a conference presentation of the research in September 2014 (Canning, 2014). They scrutinised the super and sub-themes in relation to the coding scheme. In principle they agreed that the super-themes and sub-themes were a 'best match' for the codes whilst also recognising the potential for interpretation of the different play sequences.

The different cultural perspectives represented within that group of academics was interesting as they reviewed a selection of video sequences (004: Ethan den making; 008: Matthew tyre and pole; 012: Lucy climbing to wind chime) and commented upon the social interactions between children and the cultural differences of their play compared to their understanding of their own cultural contexts. This reflects Rogoff's (2003) work on understanding the significance of cultural context in positioning play in that children's play behaviour is a direct result about what they know about social interactions and boundaries. For example the Malaysian academic was intrigued to know what 'Ben 10' was as it featured significantly in Ethan's den making play and yet was not something that she had heard of before because it is culturally specific to the USA and Europe. The academic from Australia commented on the



different perception of children's risk taking as culturally significant between all of the countries and that supporting risk taking in play can be a contentious issue. She considered that Matthew in climbing up the tyres to slide down the pole was risky play whereas the UK academic thought the video sequence represented self-challenge and determination. The discussion with the group of academics after the conference presentation affirmed that although there are cultural differences in understanding some aspects of children's play, the conceptual interpretation of the super-themes Participation, Voice and Ownership were demonstrated in the video sequences and the sub-themes were also evident within the examples. The group of academics recognised the same themes emerging in their own observations of children's play although they had not associated those themes with the concept of empowerment. They also recognised that although each of them was working in different cultural contexts, the super and sub themes were relevant and current in their practice.

There was also debate about how the sub-themes could relate to more than one super-theme. For example, in the video of Matthew climbing tyres and sliding down a pole, the codes suggest he is engaging with the sub-themes of Motivation, Problem Solving and Coordination, which in figure 7.2 locates the play sequence in the super-theme of Participation rather than Ownership. However, on considering Matthew's play as a whole, the academics did agree that the sequence did demonstrate Ownership of play, because of the way in which Matthew was behaving within the environment and his actions and reactions towards the other children involved. Through the discussion and joint analysis, the research attempted to build what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to as 'research truths' where different perspectives are taken into account, the context analysed and knowledge and understanding is built and shared. Ailwood (2010) argues that observations can never be

value free or independent of interpretation and that knowledge is socially constructed. The research is not a definitive answer to children's empowerment in play, but offers a perspective, supported by the case study children's play.

The conceptual framework (figure 7.2) is an interpretation of the different play and contexts observed and a visual representation of the connections between the play observed (operational codes), what that play accumulated towards (sub-themes) and the bigger picture for the significance of play (super-themes). Mapping out the super, and sub-themes in relation to the codes within a conceptual framework, took into consideration all 210 video sequences (approximately 30 video clips per case study child across a variety of contexts). The research through the video footage considered how knowledge and meaning about children's play built a contextual narrative of their experiences (Lofland et al., 2006) and the conceptual framework provided a 'best fit' in supporting an analysis of their play.

#### *8.6.2 Selecting the video sequences to be included in the thesis*

The thesis could not have included all 210 examples of children's play and so selected video sequences were used as examples in the Findings chapter. The research was open to bias through the selection and there were a number of considerations taken into account to minimise this. The selections were based on:

- a range of case study children and different contexts included in the findings;
- video sequences that included at least four different coding decisions;
- examples where there appeared to be a start point and end or pause point to the play;
- video sequences that had been reliability tested.

The examples selected were typical of the super and sub-themes from the overall data collection and further examples of video sequences are illustrated in the two super-theme and sub-theme matrix tables (figure 7.3 and 7.10). The video footage taken of the seven case study children was representative of their play in the different contexts within which the children were observed. However, this was not a longitudinal study and only provides a 'snapshot' of children's play interactions in a limited number of environments. The implications for the small-scale research in this thesis are reflected upon and suggestions for development of the methodology are considered in the next chapter.

Selecting the video sequence to exemplify the sub-theme of Empathy was particularly challenging because Vaish and Warneken (2012) argue that empathy is a presence that can only be surmised from other indicators in children's play. Across the video sequences empathy represented itself more as a way of being within play (Appleby, 2011) where children chose to express themselves through respectful interactions with their peers. The operational codes of following and listening were indicators of children being empathic towards one another and it was also evident through their ability to see another child's point of view. The example in the findings chapter of Lucy playing with the wind chime (007: Lucy wind chime) captures the regard she has for the other child and how she is able to recognise that playing with the wind chime has a purpose for both of them, they are sharing the play, engaging in the enjoyment and delight of it making a sound. These are features of many of the sequences where children are able to identify with and understand other children's feelings or the challenges they are facing as they play.

### *8.6.3 Generalisability of the research*

Although this thesis has presented a small-scale research study it is important to consider how generalisable the findings are. There is potential to extend the study to other pre-school aged children in similar early years contexts in England and it may also be possible to duplicate the research outside of the UK as long as researchers had access to children with opportunities for child-initiated, social play. Miles et al., (2013) suggest that it is important to consider the extent to which the conclusions of the research are transferable to other contexts. Within this research, particular attention has been given to ascertaining the generalisability of the findings through the reliability testing discussed in chapter 6.4. However the research does recognise the limitations of the contexts and participants in the study and the localisation of the geographical area covered.

The small scale nature of the research and the potential for transferable conclusions was particularly relevant in the group discussions with academic colleagues from different countries with different cultural expectations in a focus group following the presentation of the research findings at a conference. From these discussions it was felt that the concept of empowerment and the way in which it was explained in relation to play would be transferable, and the relationship between the super and sub-themes and the codes had cross cultural connections. It was acknowledged that the examples and cultural origins of play would be different and there was also concern in relation to interpreting the actions and reactions of play by other researchers with different professional backgrounds. For example, the colleague from the UK who took part in the focus group was a Playworker in a charity funded inner city adventure playground and reflected that she may look for more instances of 'risk taking' in play because of the environment in which she supports children and the philosophy of playwork in encouraging children's exploration and risk taking. Another colleague from Australia with a background in psychology reflected that she would not place the same importance on risk taking and would analyse the data in relation to children's cognitive

behaviour because of her own research interests. However, all agreed that the super-themes within the conceptual framework were broad enough for different disciplines to engage with.

According to Miles et al. (2013), enabling readers to assess the potential transferability and appropriateness of the findings for their own settings requires thorough descriptions of characteristics of the original sample of children, the settings and the interpretations of play. In this thesis, this is accounted for through defining the operational codes in chapter 6.1 and 6.3 and the explanation of the contexts and children involved in the research in chapter 5.2 and 5.3. Another kind of transferability that should be considered is theoretical generalisation; that is to see how and to what extent the findings apply to and extend existing theoretical propositions (Miles et al., 2013; Mason, 2002). This study draws upon both prior theories and research in children's play and presents findings supplementing prior research in a way that leads to new theorising on children's empowerment in play. As such, the view on generalisation of this work is not limited to the transferability to other contexts, but also includes the contribution made towards a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of play and empowerment.

## **8.7 Summary**

This chapter has considered the initial research questions, taking into account the findings from the research and the broader literature on children's play. The methodological choices have been reflected upon and some key decisions about the coding scheme and positioning of the super and sub-themes defended.

In the next chapter the contribution the thesis has made to new knowledge and understanding in relation to children's play and empowerment is discussed and recommendations are made for future research and practice in light of the findings from the research. This particularly strengthens the response to research question 3, how can articulating the significance of children's empowerment in play support early years practice?

## **Chapter Nine: Contributions and Recommendations**

This final chapter reflects on the contribution the thesis has made in relation to the generation of new knowledge and provides recommendations for practice as well as possibilities for future research.

### **9.1 Philosophy and values of children's play**

The initial research questions presented in this thesis are influenced by the playwork principle that children are intrinsically motivated to play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005; Brown, 2008; Hughes, 2001). This is why it was important that the video sequences in the research were child-initiated and that they started from the children's interests and their own motivation to play. As children were engaged in what they wanted to do, rather than being directed by a parent or practitioner, it was considered that a process of empowerment may develop from child-initiated, social interactions more readily. The observational data of children's play was interpreted from a sociocultural perspective and the subsequent analysis contributed to the debate about the significance of play in young children's lives.

The research supports a reflection of children's experiences rather than adult influences or expectations and recognises children's 'capacity for positive development, enhanced through access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities' (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005; Brown, 2008). Through play children are seen to be able to make their own choices and decisions and influence each other. Their play reflects what they already know and their opinions about the world which Sandberg and Vuorinen (2010) suggest is because children's thinking and actions are shaped by the intellectual, language and psychological tools used every day in their immediate environment. The cultural context of the research contributed to understanding the social interactions between children where

connections were made through being able to share and relate to each other's ideas. The three super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership relate to children's experiences in their play in supporting a process of empowerment.

In this research play is seen as a fluid interplay between experiences, imagination, and curiosity which support children's development and understanding of the world. However, philosophies of play encompass a spectrum of ideology and perspectives and defining what play is and what it means can be complex and subjective dependent upon cultural influences and personal emphasis (Sutton Smith, 1997). Consequently, the discourse that most closely aligns with individual values and beliefs determines the direction of professional practice and the subsequent play opportunities children engage with. In making the connection between children's play and empowerment this research aims to influence practice decisions in relation to valuing the process of empowerment and opportunities for child-initiated play.

The research generated detailed in-depth observations of child-initiated, social play experiences and considers these in relation to the process of empowerment. The research is a novel ethnographic study bringing together video sequences of case study children's play, interviews with parents and practitioners, talk with children and stimulated video review by parents and practitioners. These qualitative methods aimed to provide insight into children's empowerment in play through examining cultural and social interactions. These interactions represented the cultural constructions and meanings associated with empowerment in children's play. The ethnographic nature of the research generated themes, which were sustained through the different data sets and culminated in using a cultural frame of analysis to explore children's empowerment in play. The ethnographic nature of the research required



trust between the participants and the researcher. The data collection process of video recording in settings and in children's homes alongside the interviews with parents and practitioners meant that a substantial amount of time was spent with families and lead practitioners. The positive and trusting relationships built with participants was essential to exploring thoughts and feelings about children's play and thinking about empowerment. Participants needed to feel comfortable in offering their opinions as well as examining their own values and beliefs not only about play, but about the different opportunities they enable young children to experience.

#### *9.1.1 Play in settings and the home environment*

Play can happen anywhere (Hughes, 2001) and so it was important that the research was not restricted to organised learning based contexts. The research reflected different types of early years settings, the home environment of the case study children and included indoors and outside spaces. Given the theoretical underpinning of the sociocultural approach it was important that different play environments were represented in the research, for example, the play experience in a childminder setting may be different to that in a private day nursery where there are more children, different resources and potentially different approaches to supporting play. From the seven case study children three of them attended multiple settings as outlined in chapter 5.3 and figure 5.1. Henry attended the city centre private day nursery and the Children's Centre; Jessica and Matthew attended the rural private day nursery and a childminder. Children adapt resources and space they have to explore and experiment with ideas and Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argue that the context of children's experiences and how they make sense of what they are doing contributes to creative play experiences.

Children's play preferences in the research were evident regardless of the environment. In their play children were adaptable; they compromised and improvised within the environment and resources available to them. However, the research highlighted that a play environment can ignite children's exploration and curiosity allowing potential for following interests and experimenting with ideas (findings chapter example 008: Matthew tyres and pole). Rogers (2000) suggests that connections are made with the environment while children play, stimulating opportunities for self-expression, problem solving, communication and building social relationships. The play contexts in the research demonstrated that the environment, whatever and wherever that might be enabled children to experiment with ideas and use the resources available to them in new ways. Through playing children participated in shared experiences with other children and made meaningful connections that they revisited in different play situations and contexts. The conceptual framework (figure 7.2) illustrates how the sub and super-themes are not context specific and the research demonstrates that children were able to follow their play interests regardless of the environment and could adapt and extend their play into different contexts.

This was particularly evident when children were observed playing in their home environment, either with peers or their siblings. They were surrounded by familiar resources and confident in their play space regardless of location within the home, for example, observational video was taken in the garden, family space or children's bedrooms. Many of the resources in the children's home environment reflected the resources of the early years settings: small world toys, cars, trains and outside, climbing frames and sandpits. The example of Max show jumping is given in the findings chapter as an illustration of the sub-theme Imagination and in his home environment Max demonstrates his physical skill and imagination in using outside furniture and the landscape of the garden as jumps (008: Max show jumping). Pramling

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) suggest that children find ways to symbolise and use objects that are meaningful to them when they are absorbed and confident in their environment.

In the next section the contribution this thesis has made to new knowledge and understanding of children's empowerment in play, including theoretical and methodological contributions that were developed through the research process are considered.

## **9.2 Contributions**

The thesis makes three significant contributions to the development of new knowledge and are organised below into theoretical, methodological and practical contributions.

### *9.2.1 Theoretical contribution*

There is a wealth of literature on children's play as outlined in the literature review and literature relating to empowerment, but children's empowerment and specifically children's empowerment in play is a under-researched area. The research in this thesis has been the basis for a definition of empowerment for play and a conceptual framework for identifying children's empowerment in play. These are significant because the term 'empowerment' is an intangible and elusive concept (Rappaport, 1984) and the process of empowerment is even more perplexing (Page and Czuba, 1999). The definition and the conceptual framework offer a way in which children's empowerment in play can be understood, analysed and challenged so that it becomes part of practitioners' thinking, values and beliefs.

Although play is arguably at the centre of early years practice, it can, as stated throughout this thesis, be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on play philosophies and values (Moyles, 1989, 2010). The motivation for research into child-initiated, social play was to contribute to the knowledge about the significance of children having choice in what they want to do, having access to resources they want to play with and having the time to follow their own interests. Each of these factors support a process of empowerment but the conceptual framework offered as a result of the research is significant because it proposes a way of understanding the relationship between children's play and empowerment and what empowerment might look like in practice. The framework and supporting definition of empowerment does not locate itself within a particular context, instead it may be universally applied to any situation where child-initiated, social play takes place and so is immediately accessible and transferable in different contexts.

#### *9.2.2 Methodological contribution*

The operational coding of children's play behaviours and the subsequent positive reliability testing of the observational video data makes a methodological contribution. A sample from the findings was considered by an independent early years professional in relation to applying the operational codes to children's play in the video sequences. The results and process from a small sample were positive and may indicate that the codes could be applied in the same way in other child-initiated, social play situations. The coding system developed in this research could also be extended to supporting early years practitioners in considering a different way of observing children's play and its significance for the process of empowerment. In section 9.3.2 re-thinking children's observations is considered as a recommendation for practice and repeating the reliability testing from a practitioners' perspective would provide another dimension to the potential for using the operational codes

in describing child-initiated, social play. In addition, section 9.3.1 outlines the way in which video stimulated review could be used for early years practitioners' continuing professional development. Within these sessions there could also be a focus on the operational codes, stimulating debate how they are used to analyse play and perhaps even adding to the codes to enable them to become a living document for the setting's practice.

Lofland et al., (2006) argue that an interpretive or subjective paradigm considers how knowledge and meaning are constructed by people through building a contextual narrative of their experiences. The Findings in this research provide a contextual narrative of children's empowerment in play, through the analysis of the video sequences and interviews. These have been analysed in respect of the operational codes, sub and super-themes and the way in which sequences have been cross referenced with interviews from parents and practitioners who have used video stimulated review to comment on the case study children's play (Forman, 1999).

Chapter 3.5, figure 3.1 locates the researcher at the centre of the analytic process, bringing together the multiple viewpoints from the video data, parents, practitioners and talk with children in order to contribute towards developing a contextual narrative. To support the validity of interpretations of the data, repeated comparisons, evaluation and analysis of the video sequences and interview transcripts have taken place throughout the process (see appendix F for cross referencing between observational video data, parent and practitioner interviews and sequences that have been reliability tested). Aware of the potential bias that a researcher can bring to interpreting the data, throughout, consideration has been given to how another professional might understand the data. Consequently the research process

has been thorough with careful consideration given to the decisions made about the data (Robson, 2002). The process of testing the validity and reliability of the operational codes (in chapter 6.4) and debating the organisation of codes, sub and super-themes in a focus group with Early Years Professionals from different countries (outlined in chapter 6.6 and 8.6.1) has strengthened the integrity of the research and the subsequent claims. The methodology has been carefully thought through, with the researcher continually engaging in a reflective and critical process. At each stage the decision-making process was subject to rigorous questioning and detailed consideration of the implications of methodological choices on the process of the study. Consequently, a diverse range of perspectives about the research, its methods and positioning as an ethnographic study were subject to scrutiny and question in order to arrive at the final approach adopted.

### *9.2.3 Practice contribution*

The research contributes to early years practitioners' knowledge and understanding about children's play and the significance of play supporting a process of empowerment. The design of a toolkit incorporating observational video methods, the conceptual framework and definition of empowerment alongside questions supporting an observational guide for practitioners would make a significant contribution to the practical implications of supporting children's empowerment in play. Below in the recommendations section of this chapter, the use of observational video, used for reflecting upon professional development is outlined. At the end of the research for this thesis, professional development sessions conducted with staff from one of the early years settings that took part in the research proved a key reflective and analytical tool for analysing practice. The expansion of the conceptual framework to include specific questions for practitioners to ask as they observe play also guides pedagogic thinking and development.

## 9.3 Recommendations

### *9.3.1 Use of video review for professional development*

As stated previously the research used non-participant video observation to capture child-initiated, social play. The footage was non-invasive of the children's play space as the camera's zoom features were used effectively to minimise the impact of children's self-conscience behaviour. The results from the footage provided a fascinating insight into children's play and their interactions with other children. At the city centre, private day nursery two children, Max and Henry were case study children and after the research was completed the owner/manager of the setting asked for some staff development sessions based around the video data. With the permission of the children's parents', sequences of Max and Henry's play were shown to the whole staff team and resulted in stimulating discussion, not only specific to the children's play, but also to wider concerns about practice, observation, assessment and planning. Howard (2010, p93) argues that practitioners are often susceptible to adopting a structured activity approach where learning is more easily observed as it allows them to 'manage parental pressure for academic achievement and at the same time protect their own accountability'. Through the discussions with staff it emerged that although practitioners understood the benefits of play, they did not consider themselves to be play professionals although they wanted to promote a play-based curriculum.

The practitioners expressed their uncertainty about supporting children's play because they found play challenging to articulate. Brooker (2011) argues that talking about play will always start with 'it depends...' because of the age range that play extends to, cultural and socio-economic influences and the different contexts where play occurs is unique to every situation. Consequently developing a strong knowledge base of play as Howard (2010) suggests is

more complex than it might first appear. The overriding conclusion from the staff development sessions was that most had never considered analysing play in such detail and the video enabled sequences of play to be replayed and discussed at length. Sherin and Van Es, (2005) consider video as an insightful means of reviewing what happens in the classroom and provides space to reflect on the interactions between adults and children. The ability to review the video sequences of Max and Henry's play provided an opportunity for their key workers and the wider staff group to discuss and reflect on the children's play and also their role in supporting that play. The lead practitioner for Max and Henry commented:

'I could see Max climbing and jumping off the indoor climbing frame and I knew it was important that he be allowed to do it, but he kept doing it, climbing up, jumping down, climbing up, jumping down and I just couldn't take it anymore, I thought 'he's going to have an accident in a minute' and I just had to stop him. It sounds so silly now, because it was perfectly safe and he was showing me that he was competent by the fact he kept repeating it, but I just couldn't let him continue; now I feel really bad' (Professional development session 1).

Another insight from the professional development sessions was that key workers associated with Max had not realised how in social play situations he was not as confident or articulate with his peers as he was with adults. An assumption had been made that because with an adult on a one to one basis or in an activity where an adult was leading, Max would be leading the discussion or making significant contributions in influencing the other children, he needed little support. Watching and analysing different video sequences with staff revealed that Max showed vulnerability in social group play which had not been identified by practitioners before.



As a consequence of the professional development sessions the setting is going to look into using video more frequently in the setting to capture and analyse children's play and to use it as a basis for future professional development. The use of digital cameras in all of the settings in the research and in the home environments is prolific and so the introduction of video is not seen to be an issue for practitioners. However, some criteria for video recording was discussed so that in terms of supporting professional development, the footage was not a series of random events, but focused on specific areas of practice such as child-initiated, social play.

### *9.3.2 Re-thinking children's observations*

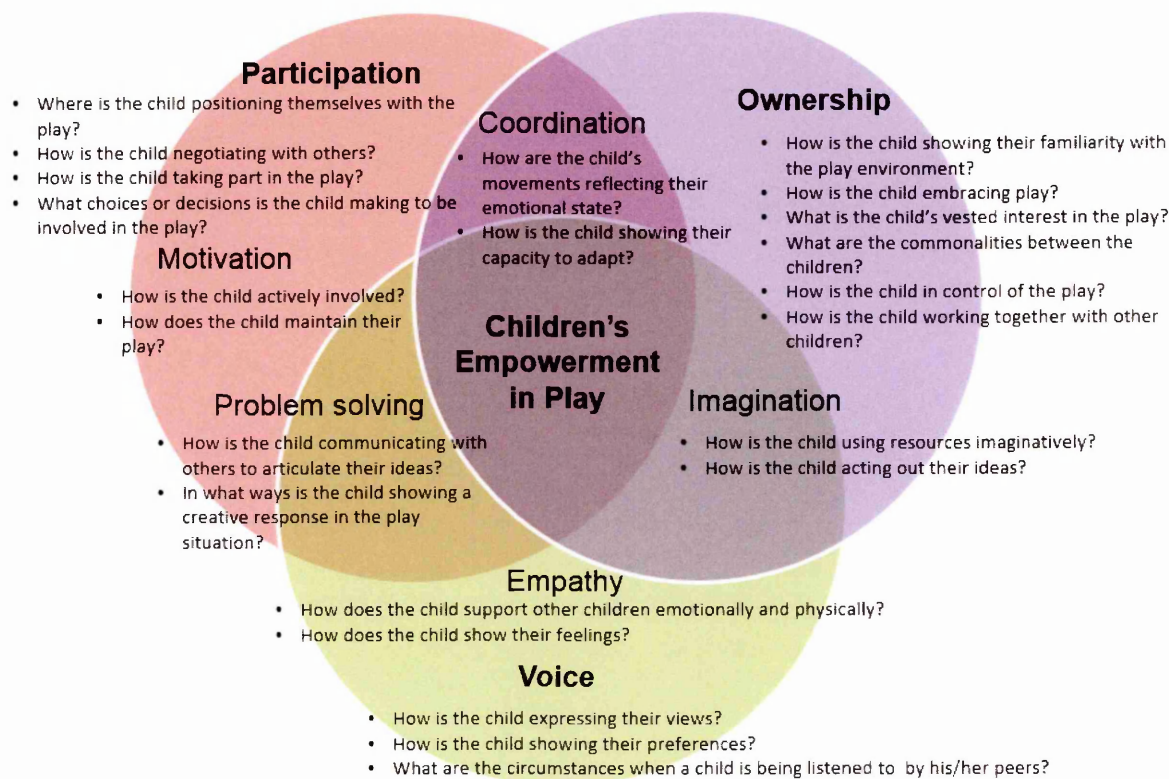
The findings from the research and the creation of figure 9.1 below provide a way in which the super and sub-themes can be utilised in practice to think about new ways of observing child-initiated, social play. Under each super and sub-theme, questions guide practitioners to observe children's actions and reactions. These open ended questions allow practitioners to consider the themes of the research in relation to children's empowerment and to potentially compare responses with other practitioners whilst observing the same child in the same play situation. The questions support practitioners to think about the social relationships children develop in play and relate closely to the conceptual definition of empowerment outlined in chapter 8.4.1.

In considering a different way of observing children, practitioners should consider not only children at the centre of the process but the way in which young children are viewed as experts in their own play. Ailwood (2011) reflects that children's play encompasses complex

negotiations and social relationships which may be acknowledged by practitioners but not analysed in terms of conceptualising children's play. In overlooking the significance of play for the possibilities of an empowering process for any child, practitioners will always have power over children's experiences (Burke, 2008). The literature review, explored Foucault's (1980) concept that power is an action and in supporting empowerment in play, that action of power should be held by the children involved in the play and not by the practitioners supporting it.

The conceptual framework below shows how practitioners could think about children's empowerment and questions they might address in their observations of children. As a whole there is a lot of information to consider in the diagram and it may be that real time observation is concentrated on one super or sub-theme or even just one of the questions so that an in-depth analysis of a particular aspect of play is made. The diagram and questions may also be used alongside video reviews of children's play as part of continuous professional development.

Figure 9.1: Questions to consider in observing children’s empowerment in play



Adopting these questions in addition to the conceptual framework would develop a new approach of observing children with empowerment at the forefront of supporting future practice. In the future children’s empowerment in play could be considered as a new way of planning and reflecting upon pedagogic practice.

The context of the research, the culturally specific nature of the case studies, the geographical location of the study and the socio-economic statuses of families were acknowledged from the start of the process and were bound by the constraints and timeframe

of the research. Because of this, there are some areas of the research that have not been fully explored and in the next section of this chapter these are considered and reflected upon as well as future research possibilities.

## **9.4 Future research possibilities**

### *9.4.1 Evaluate the conceptual framework*

The research has developed a definition of empowerment and a conceptual framework to support early years practice. A natural next step would be to evaluate the conceptual framework in everyday practice to test whether it requires further refinement and to consider how practitioners' would use the framework to support their observations and recording of children's development and well-being. This could be done through a research project with early years practitioners where they use the conceptual framework questions to observe children's play. Semi-structured interviews could then be conducted on the ease of using the framework, the perceived benefits and drawbacks in observing children in a different way and how the framework has impacted on practitioners thinking about children's empowerment in play and whether that has influenced practice and routines in the setting.

The research has not concerned itself with the practicalities of implementing curriculum guidance or policy in the UK, however, if the conceptual framework were to be adopted in practice, there may be some advantage in mapping it to pedagogic strategies to demonstrate its usability. The literature review considered Stephens' (2010) argument that practitioners find it difficult to articulate how they support play-based learning and yet the literature review also identified arguments that the pedagogic strategy which is adopted in practice is central to the play opportunities children experience. The conceptual framework developed through the

research reported in this thesis offers a way of bridging the gap between articulated pedagogy and resultant practice.

#### *9.4.2 Talk with children*

It was significant that children were at the centre of the research as the literature review argued for a child-directed view of play, supporting children to have a sense of autonomy, choice and freedom in their play decisions (Hughes, 2001). In chapter 2.4 in the literature review on recognising the right to play, use was made of the argument of Davey and Ludy (2011) that play is an entitlement, not something to be fitted around planned activities. It was also central to the research that children's opinions about their play were taken into account. Article 12 of the UNCRC rights of the child declares that 'children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters that affect them' (UNCRC, 1989, article 12, part 1).

It was important that the research reflected the views of the case study children and the video data achieves this to some extent in showing the choices and decisions children made in different contexts of play and the interactions between children. However it was challenging to elicit talk by the children about their play despite a range of strategies being employed during the pilot stage of the research (see chapter 4.1). In the research, images taken from the video data were shown to the case study children to stimulate children's reflections based on the method used by Robson (1993, 2012). However the verbal responses by the children to their play were limited even with the use of sad, smiley and extra smiley face stickers to rate their experiences. Clark (2011) advocates using a range of modes of expression with children when they are directly involved in research. This could be through child interviews,

children's own pictures or photographs or physically showing a researcher the space and resources that are important to them. According to Kellett (2005) 'children are experts in their own lives' and therefore It is important to capture their views in relation to research and understand what they were thinking and feeling at different points during the research process (Robson, 2012). The methods related to gaining children's views added their perspective in creative ways so they had the opportunity to express themselves through a variety of means (Clark, 2011).

Solberg (1996) considers that the age of children is not a factor in researching their perspectives; rather it is more important to gain insight into what factors are significant to children. In future research perhaps audio recordings of children's talk during play could provide a better insight into why children choose particular play situations. Christensen (2004) recognises the importance of children's voice in research as it supports researchers to be more reflexive in ethnographic studies. The option of child microphones was not available at the time the research was conducted due to budget and logistic constraints. It was also considered that the physical process of attaching microphones to children might disrupt the natural child-initiated, social play that the video element of the research was trying to capture. It would also have raised further ethical questions which would have had to be carefully explored (Hill, 2005).

Talk with children might also have been more revealing if a familiar practitioner had asked the questions rather than the researcher. Research by Smith et al., (2005) considers children's perspectives on their learning experiences using interviews with children and photographs to stimulate discussion. They used a mix of interviews between researcher or teacher and child,

researcher interviews with a target child and a friend; researcher interviews with a target child and a parent; and informal conversations between researchers and children in the context of play and activities where varying methods were used. The research in this thesis attempted to use similar techniques to support children's reflections on their play but perhaps could have pursued this aspect further.

#### *9.4.3 Play in multicultural communities with representation from children and families with ethnic and minority backgrounds*

The research was conducted in one city with seven case study children living within a 30 mile radius of each other in central England. It attempted to present different social and cultural views of children's play, with children from different family circumstances and socio-economic backgrounds, nevertheless the sample size and location of the study restricted this to white British families representative of the community in which the research took place. The research was conducted with a limited amount of resources which necessitated a local and accessible range of early years settings, practitioners, children and parents. There was not a multicultural mix of children attending any of the settings. If there had been opportunities to involve a range of communities and families from ethnic and minority backgrounds, the data, especially interviews with parents may have revealed other perspectives on children's play and thoughts about empowerment.

Researching children's play in a spectrum of communities, representative of the UK population, would provide a more balanced view of children's play on a larger scale. An insight into different cultural perceptions of play and empowerment would also add another dimension to future work. Without widening the reach of the study it is impossible to know the limitations on the extent to which the conceptual framework (figure 7.2) or recommendations

from this research are generalisable. However, the definition of empowerment and the associated conceptual framework were developed with the aim of universal and inclusive application to children and their play. Validating this would clearly require extensive further research in a broader range of contexts.

#### *9.4.4 International comparisons*

The discussion with academics from different countries in a small focus group after a European conference presentation on this research (Canning, 2014) highlighted the potential for international comparisons of children's empowerment in play. The discussion centred around the generalizability of the conceptual framework to other play contexts and cultures, outlined in the previous chapter 8.6.1, but the interest within the group demonstrated that the connection made in this thesis between children's empowerment and play was something that could be taken forward in international research in the future.

In considering international comparisons, the research could be extended in a number of ways. For example, it would be valuable to follow a set of case study children in everyday situations such as observing play opportunities whilst walking or driving to nursery or to the shops or play in community playgrounds to observe how they respond and interact with other environments, children and adults. A study of play opportunities in everyday situations with international comparisons might include consideration of how children initiate opportunities for play, the way in which they utilise the environment and how they engage other children or perhaps adults to join in with what they are doing. These areas could be compared with children's everyday experiences from different countries and cultures to build a layered picture of children's opportunities for play.



Previous research has used a 'day in the life' of children and practitioners method (Gillen et al., 2007) which focuses on children's experiences and practitioners' professional development. There is potential to adapt the research methods outlined in this thesis to follow children's everyday play opportunities. Figure 4.1 in chapter 4.2.2 outlined the amount of video data collected in each of the four settings from this research. From observing and recording child-initiated, social play on the four visits to each of the settings over a four week period only a fraction of that time was dedicated to child-initiated play. The rest of the time was occupied with structured activities and planned routines.

It would be relevant to document over a set period the number of times children had opportunities for child-initiated, social play, the ways in which children negotiated those situations and where they occurred. There could be particular variety with international comparisons and this would also provide another perspective for possibilities to better understand the process of empowerment and how children access different opportunities for play, outside of formal settings. The research reported in this thesis captured more informal play opportunities with observational video in the children's homes, but play is universal and often, according to Hughes (2001) happens in the most unlikely places. Research from Moser and Martinsen (2010) in Norway for example considers how the outdoors is important as a pedagogical space for children's play, learning and development. Their longitudinal study examines the cultural, social and physical environments Norwegian kindergartens offer in terms of children's social competences and development. There may be future possibilities of documenting children's play patterns and opportunities providing rich comparisons between international contexts contributing towards understanding different play cultures.

## **9.5 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the contributions the research in this thesis offers in relation to new knowledge and understanding about children's empowerment in play. It has made recommendations centred around developing early years professional practice and has made suggestions for future research. The research in this thesis is unique and significant in offering new insights via the bridging of child-initiated, social play and empowerment, and how these may have important implications for the way early years practitioners offer play opportunities to children in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This research has explored children's empowerment supported through child-initiated social play. It has considered the multi-faceted nature of play (Moyle, 2005) where the term 'play' encompasses a spectrum of ideology, values and beliefs. It has argued that adults' focus on children's play should centre on transformative experiences where the unpredictability and open-endedness of play is celebrated. This study has established that empowerment in play is not determined by the context, but is influenced by children's actions and reactions within that context. Empowerment therefore in this research is not restricted by the environment or resources within it, but can be accessed by children through their interactions and the possibilities available through play.

The research in this thesis is not based on one single action, event or circumstance, but has contributed towards a layered picture of empowerment. The super-themes of Participation, Voice and Ownership for children are based on their terms, determined by their choices and decisions and negotiated between them in play. Therefore empowering experiences are generated between children as part of an overall shared experience in play. Considering play and empowerment as a process supports on-going reflections about how play is valued, not just in formal contexts such as early years settings, but also by parents and the wider community. The thesis throughout has advocated that play is universal to all children and intrinsically motivated by them (Hughes, 2001) and observing play in a variety of contexts including children's home environments has supported this philosophy.

Empowerment is something that has not been readily associated with children's play before but the super-themes and sub-themes of the conceptual framework provide a way in which

children's actions and reactions in play can be analysed. Recognising children's experiences in play and that they support a process of empowerment may contribute to a new way for early years practitioners to plan and reflect upon pedagogic practice. The conceptual framework and definition of empowerment offers a way in which children's empowerment in play can be understood, analysed and challenged so that it becomes part of early years practitioner's thinking, values and beliefs and supports positive play experiences for children.

At the beginning of this thesis the rationale for the study was explained. The aspiration was to contribute to the pedagogy surrounding children's play through considering empowerment as a process to support children's learning and development. The research has demonstrated that child-initiated, social play is rich in opportunities for empowering experiences and through the conceptual framework and supporting definition of empowerment these opportunities are able to be identified. Beliefs and values about children's play are not always openly articulated in early years settings and the conceptual framework resulting from this research provides a basis for re-starting the debate about the significance of children's play and how best to support children's empowerment in practice.

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## **Appendices**

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From Dr Duncan Banks  
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee  
Email d.banks@open.ac.uk  
Extension 59198

To Natalie Canning, CREET/FELS  
Subject *"The power of play: a focus on young children's empowerment during child-initiated social play."*  
Ref HREC/2012/#1206/1  
Red form  
Submitted 10 June 2012  
Date 15 June 2012

## Memorandum

---

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, is **approved** by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please make sure that any question(s) relating to your application and approval are sent to [Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk](mailto:Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk) quoting the HREC reference number. We will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible so that your research is not delayed in any way.

At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee would like to receive a summary report on the progress of this project, any ethical issues that have arisen and how they have been dealt with.

Regards,

Dr Duncan Banks  
Chair OU HREC

## **Appendix B**

Examples of information leaflets and consent letters for parents, practitioners and early years settings

### **Information leaflets**

- General information leaflet for parents whose children attend the setting and early years practitioners who work at the setting who are not going to be actively involved in the research
- Information leaflet for parents of the case study children
- Information leaflet for lead practitioners and key workers of the case study children

### **Consent forms**

- Consent form for parents of the case study children
- Consent form for early years settings
- Consent form for lead early years practitioners and key workers being interviewed for the research



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## **Parent and Early Years Practitioner Information Leaflet**

### **Children's empowerment in play**

Your setting is interested in taking part in a research project which I am carrying out in partial completion of the requirements for a postgraduate qualification, based at the Open University. This leaflet tells you about the research, and how to contact me should you wish to.

#### **What is the research about?**

The project concentrates on children's social play where there are no adults involved and the children have initiated play by themselves. The research aims to answer the question: 'In what ways can child-initiated social play empower children?' and to come up with a definition of empowerment which will help early years practitioners improve their understanding of play and the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning. It involves observing children in their everyday play, talking to children's key workers, and some parents and their child about play.

#### **Why is this project important?**

Children's empowerment in play is an under-researched area, yet it is important for children's social and emotional development. Children are influenced by the social and physical world around them and, when they play, they practice what they have seen and heard. Some play can be empowering for individual children or for groups, for example, if they discover something new, or solve a problem. At other times, they may feel dis-empowered, for example, if their ideas are not recognised or valued by other children or adults. The research aims to develop a definition of children's empowerment in play to support early years practitioners in recognising the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning.

### **What will happen?**

As part of the project I will video record short clips of selected children playing with other children where no adults are involved in their everyday play in the setting. I will talk with early years practitioners and some parents about children's play. I will audio record these conversations. I will video record the children in the setting, talk with practitioners about children's play and to some parents a total of three times over the summer.

### **What will happen to the information?**

I will change all names so the children, settings and staff will be anonymous. Any information given will be treated as confidential. It will be stored safely and the information gathered will be used only for research, presentations and training purposes. It will form part of my PhD thesis and I will give a summary of the study findings to each setting and to parents who wish to receive a copy. The information will also be used to write articles for publication and for presentations to other researchers and practitioners at conferences. Some of these publications and presentations may be available on the internet. Selected clips from the video recordings and/or still photographs might be used in presentations or in articles and I will ask for individual permission before they are included.

### **What if I don't want my child to be included in any video material?**

The video footage will not focus on your child, but they may appear in the video if they are playing with other children, or they may appear in the background.

You have the opportunity to 'opt out' your child appearing in any video footage taken in the setting. Simply let your child's room leader know, the owner of the setting or contact me or my supervisor on the numbers or email below. You will be asked to sign a brief statement indicating that you do not want your child to appear in the video footage. The video sessions in the setting will then attempt to avoid filming your child but if your child does appear in the footage, that segment will be discarded from the study. You will be able to 'opt out' your child of the video footage up until 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

### **What are the benefits of the study?**

The main benefits of this study are to gain reliable insights into children's empowerment through play. This information may help to inform local and wider early years practice to support children's development and learning. It will also give practitioners the opportunity to think and talk about different ways to improve practice and there may be direct benefits to children participating in this study.

### **Any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:

**Natalie Canning** [n.canning@open.ac.uk](mailto:n.canning@open.ac.uk) 07724198474

**Or my PhD supervisor John Oates** [j.m.oates@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.oates@open.ac.uk) 01908 652395





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Dear Parent,

### **Children's empowerment in Play**

The early years setting your child attends is interested in taking part in a research project which I am carrying out in partial completion of the requirements for a postgraduate qualification, based at the Open University. This leaflet tells you about the research, and how to contact me should you wish to.

#### **What is the research about?**

The project concentrates on children's social play where there are no adults involved and the children have initiated play by themselves. The research aims to answer the question: 'In what ways can child-initiated social play empower children?' and to come up with a definition of empowerment which will help practitioners improve their understanding of play and the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning. It involves observing the children in their everyday play, talking to practitioners, yourself and your child about their play.

#### **Why is this project important?**

Children's empowerment in play is an under-researched area, yet it is important for children's social and emotional development. Children are influenced by the social and physical world around them and, when they play, they practice what they have seen and heard. Some play can be empowering for individual children or for groups, for example, if they discover something new, or solve a problem. At other times, they may feel dis-empowered, for example, if their ideas are not recognised or valued by other children or adults. The research aims to develop a definition of children's empowerment in play to support early years practitioners in recognising the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning.

### **What will happen?**

As part of the project I will video record short clips of your child playing with other children where no adults are involved in their everyday play in the setting. I will talk with early years practitioners who know your child and with you about your child and your child's play. I will audio record these conversations. I will video record your child in the setting and talk to practitioners a total of three times over the summer. I would also like to talk with you about your child at the beginning and end of the study.

### **What will happen to the information?**

I will change all names so the children, settings and staff will be anonymous. Any information given will be treated as confidential. It will be stored safely and the information gathered will be used only for research and training purposes. It will form part of my PhD thesis and I will give a summary of the study findings to each setting and to parents who wish to receive a copy. The information will also be used to write articles for publication and for presentations to other researchers and practitioners at conferences. Some of these publications and presentations may be available on the internet. Selected clips from the video recordings and/or still photographs might be used in presentations or in articles and I will ask for individual permission before they are included.

### **What happens if I change my mind?**

I will be sensitive to the children's wishes and will be guided by the early years practitioners in this. If I feel that a child does not wish to be recorded at a particular time, I will stop for that time. I will also respect the wishes of early years practitioners and parents throughout the research, and will arrange visits at times that are convenient to you. However, you may still change your mind about your child participating in the study and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, even after signing the consent form. If you decide to do this, I will not use the information from your child and it will be securely destroyed.

### **What are the benefits of the study?**

The main benefits of this study are to gain reliable insights into children's empowerment through play. This information may help to inform local and wider early years practice to support children's development and learning. It will also give practitioners the opportunity to think and talk about different ways to improve their practice and there may be direct benefits to your child for participating in this study.

### **Any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:

**Natalie Canning** [n.canning@open.ac.uk](mailto:n.canning@open.ac.uk) 07724198474

**Or my PhD supervisor John Oates** [j.m.oates@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.oates@open.ac.uk) 01908 652395



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Dear Early Years Practitioner,

### **Children's empowerment in Play**

Your early years setting is interested in taking part in a research project which I am carrying out in partial completion of the requirements for a postgraduate qualification, based at the Open University. This leaflet tells you about the research, and how to contact me should you wish to.

#### **What is the research about?**

The project is concentrating on children's social play where there are no adults involved and the children have initiated play by themselves. The research aims to answer the question: 'In what ways can child initiated, social play, empower children?' and to come up with a definition of empowerment which will help you improve your understanding of play and the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning. It involves observing children in their everyday play, talking to you, some parents and their child about play.

#### **Why is this project important?**

Children's empowerment in play is an under researched area, but important for children's social and emotional development. Children are influenced by the social and physical world around them and, when they play, they practice what they have seen and heard. Some play can be empowering for individual children or for groups, for example if they discover something new, or solve a problem. At other times, they may feel dis-empowered, for example if their ideas are not recognised by other children or adults. The research aims to develop a definition of children's empowerment in play to support you in recognising the significance of empowerment in children's development and learning.

### **What will happen?**

As part of the project I will video record short clips of selected children playing with other children where no adults are involved in their everyday play in the setting. I will talk with you and with parents about their child's play. I will audio record these conversations. I will video record selected children in the setting, talk to you and to parents a total of three times over the summer.

### **What will happen to the information?**

I will change all names so the children, settings and staff will be anonymous. Any information given will be treated as confidential. It will be stored safely and the information gathered will be used only for research and training purposes. It will form part of my PhD thesis and I will give a summary to each setting and to parents who wish to receive a copy. The information will also be used to write articles for publication and for presentations to other researchers and practitioners at conferences. Some of these publications and presentations may be available on the internet. Selected clips from the video recordings and/or still photographs might be used in presentations or in articles and I will ask for individual permission before they are included.

### **What happens if I change my mind?**

I will be sensitive to the children's wishes and will be guided by you in this. If I feel that a child does not wish to be recorded at a particular time, I will stop for that time. I will also respect your wishes throughout the research, and will arrange visits at times that are convenient to you. However, you may still change your mind about participating in the study and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, even after signing the consent form. If you decide to do this, I will not use the information from you and it will be securely destroyed.

### **What are the benefits of the study?**

The main benefits of this study are to gain reliable insights into children's empowerment through play. This information may help to inform local and wider early years practice to support children's development and learning. It will also give you the opportunity to think and talk about different ways to improve your practice and there may be direct benefits to the children participating in this study.

### **Any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research, please e-mail or telephone:

**Natalie Canning** [n.canning@open.ac.uk](mailto:n.canning@open.ac.uk) 07724198474

**Or my PhD supervisor John Oates** [j.m.oates@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.oates@open.ac.uk) 01908 652395



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**CONSENT FORM: PARENTS**

**Children's empowerment in Play**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet relating to this study, and I understand that:

**Children's participation**

- My child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my child at any time up until 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012 without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the early years practitioners or the researcher.
- If there is any information collected about my child that I do not wish to be used, it will be securely destroyed on request.
- I give permission for my child to be video-recorded in the setting and home environment, as set out in the information sheet.
- The research will not use real names for children, practitioners or settings in any publications.
- I give permission for the researcher to use audio and video recordings of my child for research, conference presentations and training purposes only.

**Parent's participation**

- My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the researcher.
- If there is any information collected about me that I do not wish to be used, it will be securely destroyed on request.
- I give permission for any interviews to be audio recorded, as set out in the information sheet.

- The research will not use real names for children, practitioners or settings in any publications.
- I give permission for the researcher to use audio and video recordings of me for research, conference presentations and training purposes only.

I am happy for my child and myself to take part in this study.

YES ☐

NO ☐

Your name(s) (please print) .....

Name of your child .....

Signature.....Date.....



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## **CONSENT FORM: EARLY YEARS SETTING**

### **Children's empowerment in Play**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet relating to this study, and I understand that:

- The settings participation in the research is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012 without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the researcher.
- If there is any information collected about the setting that I do not wish to be used, it will be securely destroyed on request.
- I give permission for video-recording to take place in the setting.
- The research will not use real names for children, practitioners or settings in any publications.
- I give permission for the researcher to use audio and video recordings of the setting for research, conference presentations and training purposes only.

I am happy for the setting to take part in this study.

YES

☐

NO

☐

Your name (please print) .....

Name of the setting .....

Role/responsibility in the setting .....

Signature.....Date.....

**Thank you for your time.**





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## CONSENT FORM: EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

### Children's empowerment in play

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet relating to this study, and I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012 without giving a reason and without prejudice by informing the researcher.
- If there is any information collected about me that I do not wish to be used, it will be securely destroyed on request.
- I give permission to be video-recorded in the setting, although I understand I will not be the focus of the video observations, as set out in the information sheet.
- The research will not use real names for children, practitioners or settings in any publications.
- I give permission for the researcher to use audio and video recordings of me for research, conference presentations and training purposes only.

I am happy to take part in this study.

YES

☐

NO

☐

Your name (please print) .....

Name of the setting .....

Role/responsibility in the setting .....

Signature.....Date.....

**Thank you for your time.**



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**OPT OUT CONFIRMATION FORM**

**Children's empowerment in Play**

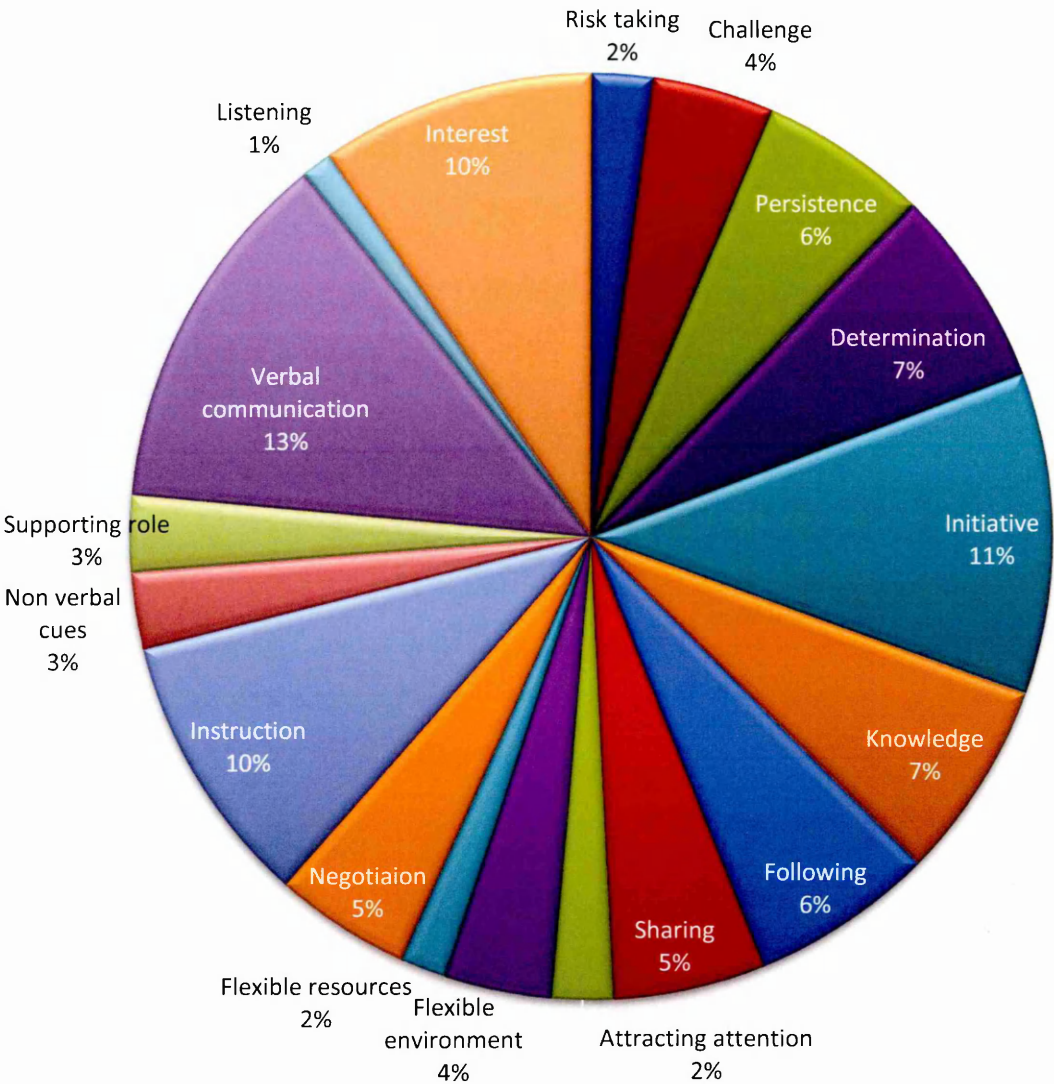
I confirm that do not wish my child to appear in any video footage relating to this study and understand that by signing this 'opt out' confirmation form, any video footage where my child appears will be discarded from the study. I understand I can opt out my child from this study up until 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

Your name(s) (please print) .....

Name of your child .....

Signature.....Date.....

Operational codes as percentages



This graph shows the frequency (as a percentage) of each of the operational codes after analysing all 210 video sequences with Atlas ti computer software.

Appendix E    Video sequences scrutinised by an external early years academic

Child	Title of video clip	Context	Codes identified by academic
Matthew	006 Rolling pipe	Rural private day nursery, outside	Initiative Interest (x2 instances) Flexible environment
Matthew	008 Tyre and pole	Rural private day nursery, outside	Challenge Flexible resources Problem solving Initiative Negotiation Supporting role
Matthew	001 Selecting cars	Childminder, inside	Knowledge Verbal communication Instruction Determination
Lucy	006 Block play knock down	Rural private day nursery, inside	Verbal communication Supporting role Knowledge Sharing
Lucy	007 Wind chime	Rural private day nursery, outside	Verbal communication Following Listening Knowledge

<b>Child</b>	<b>Title of video clip</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Child</b>
Lucy	009 Jewels	Home environment, inside	Instruction Verbal communication Sharing Interest
Max	004 Pipes	City centre private day nursery, outside	Interest Initiative Challenge Persistence
Max	005 Obstacle course	Home environment, inside	Instruction Flexible environment Flexible resources Determination
Max	008 Show jumping	Home environment, outside	Challenge Involving an adult Flexible resources Flexible environment Verbal communication
Henry	003 Dripping water	Children's Centre, outside	Risk Persistence Non-verbal communication Interest Flexible environment
Henry	012 Loud speaker	City centre, private day nursery, inside	Attracting attention Interest Flexible resources Verbal communication Listening Negotiation Following

Child	Title of video clip	Context	Child
Henry	019 Jail	Children's Centre, outside	Interest Verbal communication Flexible environment Flexible resources Following Listening
Ethan	009 Stick argument	Children's Centre, outside	Initiative Verbal communication Interest Determination (x2 instances)
Ethan	004 Den making	Children's Centre, outside	Verbal communication Knowledge Negotiation Instruction (x2 instances) Determination (x2 instances) Sharing Interest
Ethan	024 Spiderman gloves	Home environment, inside	Verbal communication Sharing Knowledge Instruction Flexible resources
Abigail	009 Trains	Rural private day nursery, inside	Knowledge Non-verbal communication Persistence Interest

Child	Title of video clip	Context	Child
Abigail	021 Lucy and Abigail Painting	Rural private day nursery, inside	Instruction Verbal communication Knowledge Sharing Attracting attention
Abigail	028 Dolls house	Rural private day nursery, inside	Verbal communication Interest Sharing Attracting attention Listening
Jessica	003 On a bridge	Rural private day nursery, outside	Following Persistence
Jessica	001 Rolling pipe	Rural private day nursery, outside	Interest (x2 instances) Verbal communication Non-verbal communication Flexible environment
Jessica	019 Dancing and hair	Childminder, inside	Initiative Instruction Knowledge Verbal communication Flexible environment



**Appendix F**

Seven page spreadsheet of video sequences organised by case study child, cross matched with parent and practitioner video stimulated review and reliability testing.

Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Abigail	Digital toy	Home	Inside			
2 Abigail	Lego	Home	Inside			
3 Abigail	Building a tower	Home	Inside			
4 Abigail	Lego and dragons	Home	Inside			
5 Abigail	Boat and fire engine	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
6 Abigail	Fire engine	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Practitioner 3		
7 Abigail	Slide and running	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
8 Abigail	Book corner	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
9 Abigail	Trains	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2	Yes	
10 Abigail	Catch	Rural private day nursery	Outside			Matrix Motivation
11 Abigail	Painting	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
12 Abigail	Tyre 2	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3		Matrix Voice
13 Abigail	Hospital play	Rural private day nursery	Inside			Matrix Imagination
14 Abigail	Climbing tyre and singing	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
15 Abigail	At petrol pump	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
16 Abigail	Playing ball	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
17 Abigail	Gorilla toy	Home	Inside			
18 Abigail	Dolls in a car	Home	Inside			
19 Abigail	Pretend play, sword	Home	Inside			
20 Abigail	Playing records	Home	Inside			
21 Abigail	Lucy and Abi Painting	Rural private day nursery	Inside		Yes	
22 Abigail	Train track destruction	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
23 Abigail	Dressing up	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
24 Abigail	Collecting sticks	Home	Outside			
25 Abigail	Racing bikes	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
26 Abigail	Hoops and ball	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
27 Abigail	Jigsaw	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
28 Abigail	Dolls house	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2	Yes	
29 Abigail	Dancing bears	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
30 Abigail	Digging the gardent	Rural private day nursery	Outside			

Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Ethan	Making a train track	Home	Inside			Matrix Motivation
2 Ethan	Tree den	Children's Centre	Outside	Practitioner 3		
3 Ethan	Tree climb	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2		
4 Ethan	Den making	Children's Centre	Outside	Practitioner 3	Yes	Super-theme Participation
5 Ethan	Water butt	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3		Matrix Ownerships
6 Ethan	Cars and bridge	Home	Inside			
7 Ethan	Mixing	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2		Matrix Problem solving
8 Ethan	Making food for animals	Children's Centre	Outside			
9 Ethan	Stick argument	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	
10 Ethan	Dragging logs	Children's Centre	Outside			
11 Ethan	Making hot chocolate	Children's Centre	Outside			
12 Ethan	Pretend remote control	Home	Inside			
13 Ethan	Car negotiation with friend	Home	Inside			
14 Ethan	Fixing the car	Home	Inside			
15 Ethan	Giving instruction	Home	Inside			
16 Ethan	Basket and doctors	Home	Inside			
17 Ethan	Transformers	Home	Inside			
18 Ethan	Rough and tumble play	Home	Inside			
19 Ethan	Transformers to Mummies and dogs	Home	Inside			
20 Ethan	Gruffalo story	Children's Centre	Outside			
21 Ethan	Squirrel and snake in tree	Children's Centre	Outside			
22 Ethan	Hide and seek	Children's Centre	Outside			
23 Ethan	Tyres and tree	Children's Centre	Outside			
24 Ethan	Spiderman gloves	Home	Inside		Yes	
25 Ethan	Pretend play vets and phone	Home	Inside			
26 Ethan	In the hutt	Children's Centre	Outside			
27 Ethan	Ethan's nest	Children's Centre	Outside			
28 Ethan	Climbing monkeys	Children's Centre	Outside			
29 Ethan	Moving mud	Children's Centre	Outside			
30 Ethan	Tree house monsters	Children's Centre	Outside			

Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Henry	Play fight	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Practitioner 3		Matrix Imagination
2 Henry	Tree climbing	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2		
3 Henry	Dripping water	Children's Centre	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	
4 Henry	Monster and batman	Home	Inside			
5 Henry	Cardboard box	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Practitioner 3		Matrix Coordination
6 Henry	Playing with water	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		
7 Henry	Spaceship	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
8 Henry	Lego spaceship and monsters	Home	Inside			
9 Henry	Water play	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
10 Henry	In a box	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
11 Henry	Space boots	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
12 Henry	Loud speaker	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	Super-theme Voice
13 Henry	Running	Children's Centre	Outside			
14 Henry	Pretending to be the police	Children's Centre	Outside			
15 Henry	Small figure play	Home	Inside			
16 Henry	Batman house	Home	Inside			
17 Henry	Henry and rope	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
18 Henry	Table game	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
19 Henry	Jail	Children's Centre	Outside		Yes	
20 Henry	ipad apps - digital play	Home	Inside			
21 Henry	Building a lego castle	Home	Inside			
22 Henry	Batman and monster in lego castle	Home	Inside			
23 Henry	Batman and monster fight	Home	Inside			
24 Henry	Lego castle knock down	Home	Inside			
25 Henry	Ben 10 treehouse	Children's Centre	Outside			
26 Henry	Pretend tea in the hutt	Children's Centre	Outside			
27 Henry	Making a nest	Children's Centre	Outside			
28 Henry	Waiting for marshmallows	Children's Centre	Outside			
29 Henry	Water butt with Ethan	Children's Centre	Outside			
30 Henry	Racing bikes	City centre private day nursery	Outside			



Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Jessica	Rolling pipe	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Childminder 1, Practitioner 3	Yes	Sub-theme Coordination Matrix Empathy
2 Jessica	Finding people	Home	Inside			
3 Jessica	On a bridge	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Childminder 1	Yes	
4 Jessica	Jess and cars	Childminder	Inside			
5 Jessica	Tyre and tree	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Practitioner 3		Matrix Participation
6 Jessica	Pole swinging	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
7 Jessica	Climbing tyres	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
8 Jessica	Building a tower	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
9 Jessica	Hairdresser	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
10 Jessica	Hide and seek with Matthew	Home	Inside			
11 Jessica	Music	Home	Inside			
12 Jessica	Matching shoes	Home	Inside			
13 Jessica	Running	Home	Outside			
14 Jessica	Playing with cars	Childminder	Inside			
15 Jessica	Train set construction	Childminder	Inside	Childminder 1	Yes	
16 Jessica	Packing a suitcase for teddy	Childminder	Inside			
17 Jessica	Pretending to be a rabbit	Childminder	Outside			
18 Jessica	Pretend food	Childminder	Inside			
19 Jessica	Dancing and hair	Childminder	Inside			
20 Jessica	Child size toy car jam	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
21 Jessica	Giving petrol	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
22 Jessica	Making bead necklaces	Home	Inside			
23 Jessica	Trampoline	Home	Outside			
24 Jessica	Playing with brothers cars	Home	Inside			
25 Jessica	Dressing up shoes	Childminder	Inside			
26 Jessica	Necklace and handbag	Childminder	Inside			
27 Jessica	Drawing	Childminder	Inside			
28 Jessica	Construction blocks	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
29 Jessica	Painting	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
30 Jessica	Rough and tumble with boys	Rural private day nursery	Inside			

Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Lucy	Drawing	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
2 Lucy	Stickers and dolls	Home	Inside			
3 Lucy	Banging table	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		Matrix Participation
4 Lucy	Panda bag	Home	Inside			
5 Lucy	Dressing up	Home	Inside			
6 Lucy	Block play knock down	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	
7 Lucy	Wind chime	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Parent 2	Yes	Sub-theme Empathy
8 Lucy	Stacking	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
9 Lucy	Jewels	Home	Inside		Yes	
10 Lucy	Pretend police	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
11 Lucy	Painting with Abi	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		Matrix Motivation
12 Lucy	Climbing to wind chime	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
13 Lucy	Swinging and running	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
14 Lucy	Slide	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
15 Lucy	Slide and run	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
16 Lucy	Slide with wood	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
17 Lucy	Dancing	Home	Inside			
18 Lucy	Stack and chime	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Practitioner 3		Matrix Ownership
19 Lucy	Stepping stones	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
20 Lucy	Pretend cars with crates	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
21 Lucy	Table cloth baby bumps	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
22 Lucy	Clack and babies	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
23 Lucy	Singing with the microphone	Home	Inside			
24 Lucy	Dressing up clothes and material	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
25 Lucy	Preparing for a picnic 1	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
26 Lucy	Going on a picnic 2	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
27 Lucy	Setting up the picnic 3	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
28 Lucy	Climbing the tractor tyres	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
29 Lucy	Tea set	Home	Inside			
30 Lucy	Playing with the dog	Home	Inside			

Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of Matrix Voice & Sub-theme Problem solving
1 Matthew	Selecting cars	Childminder	Inside		Yes	
2 Matthew	Taking turns	Home	Inside			
3 Matthew	Stick fight	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
4 Matthew	Drawing	Rural private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		Matrix Problem solving
5 Matthew	Dressing up	Childminder	Inside			
6 Matthew	Rolling pipe	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	
7 Matthew	Bike race	Childminder	Outside			
8 Matthew	Tyre and pole	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Parent 2, Practitioner 3	Yes	Super-theme Ownership
9 Matthew	Setting up a race track	Childminder	Outside			
10 Matthew	Racing toy cars	Childminder	Inside			
11 Matthew	Hiding shoes	Childminder	Inside			
12 Matthew	Trampoline with Jess	Home	Outside			
13 Matthew	Jumping off steps	Home	Outside			
14 Matthew	Hide and seek with Jess	Home	Inside			
15 Matthew	Stacking tyres	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
16 Matthew	Swinging on pole	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
17 Matthew	Throwing grass	Rural private day nursery	Outside	Practitioner 3		
18 Matthew	Stepping stone logs	Rural private day nursery	Outside			
19 Matthew	Block play tower	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
20 Matthew	Obstacle course for cars	Childminder	Inside			
21 Matthew	Lining up cars	Childminder	Inside			
22 Matthew	Hairdressing model for Jess	Childminder	Inside			
23 Matthew	Pretend assault course	Home	Outside			
24 Matthew	Searching in play house	Home	Outside			
25 Matthew	Wood to make a slide	Home	Outside			
26 Matthew	Making trains crash	Childminder	Inside			
27 Matthew	Rebuilding train track	Childminder	Inside			
28 Matthew	Role play picnic	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
29 Matthew	Searching for a picnic cloth	Rural private day nursery	Inside			
30 Matthew	Picnic cloth cape	Rural private day nursery	Inside			



Child	Video Sequence Title	Location	Inside/Outside	Interview specific to clip	Reliability testing	Clip selected as example of
1 Max	Construction	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Practitioner 3		
2 Max	Football	Home	Outside			
3 Max	Playing with toy cars	Home	Inside			
4 Max	Pipes	City centre private day nursery	Outside	Parent 2	Yes	Sub-theme Motivation
5 Max	Obstacle course	Home	Inside	Practitioner 3	Yes	Matrix Ownership
6 Max	In toy car - pretend driving	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Practitioner 3		
7 Max	In toy car - back passenger	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		
8 Max	Show jumping	Home	Outside		Yes	Sub-theme Imagination
9 Max	Traffic jam	City centre private day nursery	Outside	Practitioner 3		Matrix Voice
10 Max	Water play	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		
11 Max	Pretending to be at the Olympics	Home	Inside			
12 Max	Hurdles	Home	Outside			
13 Max	Building a train track	Home	Inside			
14 Max	Hideaway den	Home	Outside			
15 Max	Hairdresser	City centre private day nursery	Inside	Parent 2		
16 Max	Carpenters tools	Home	Inside			
17 Max	Racing cars	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
18 Max	Climbing and sliding	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
19 Max	Sinking a boat - water play	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
20 Max	Water play argument	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
21 Max	Small farm animals	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
22 Max	Crane and cars	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
23 Max	Rough and tumble with boys	City centre private day nursery	Inside			
24 Max	Transporting water	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
25 Max	Planting flowers	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
26 Max	Moving small wooden planks	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
27 Max	Stacking small wooden planks	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
28 Max	Hiding in a tractor tyre	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
29 Max	Balancing on the rim of a tractor tyre	City centre private day nursery	Outside			
30 Max	Fetching and carrying	City centre private day nursery	Inside			